AUSTRALIA'S #1 PC GAMING MAG

PC PowerPlay

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ELDEN RING

FROM SOFTWARE DELIVERS ITS NEXT EPIC RPG, & WE'VE HAD HANDS ON ACCESS TO WHAT COULD BE THE ULTIMATE SOULS GAME

PREVIEW

2022 PREVIEW

THE GAMES WE CAN'T WAIT TO PLAY THIS YEAR!

ELDEN RING™

25 FEBRUARY 2022

MA 15+ RESTRICTED — Strong fantasy themes and violence, online interactivity

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Printed in Australia by IVE
Distributed in Australia and NZ by Are Direct

ISSN 0728-441

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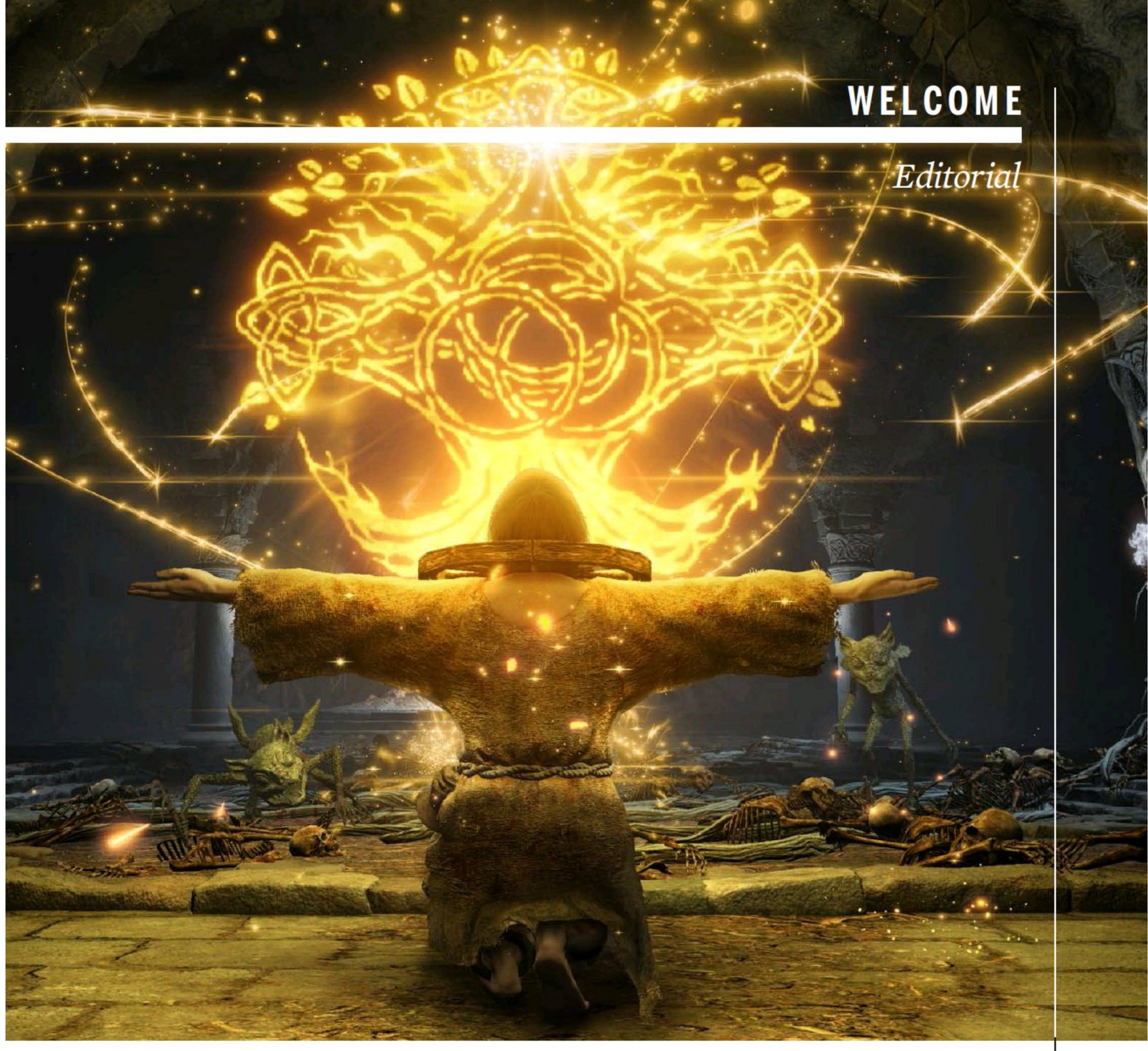

JUST HARD

Will Elden Ring get me into Souls games?

When you think of someone who's lucky enough to edit a games magazine like this one, you might imagine the kind of gamer who loves every genre out there, from puzzle games to shooters, strategy titles to RPGs. Sadly... I am not that editor, and there is one kind of game I've always bounced off. Yep... it's Souls-like games. Like this issue's cover feature, Elden Ring, from actual Dark Souls developer From Software.

But I'm not gonna lie... after putting together this issue, I'm a little tempted to dip my toe into the water. I know it'll get bitten off, chewed up, and likely spat back at me. But I'm going to give it a red-hot go.

So, dear reader, if a somewhat more haggard and drawn visage greets you by the time next issue comes around... you'll know why. In the meantime, wish me luck for the game's launch in February. I suspect I'm gonna need it...

And, as it's closing in on year's end as I write this, Happy New Year from me and the team at Future!

David Hollingworth

"... there is one kind of game I've always bounced off. Yep... it's Souls-like games."

WELCOME

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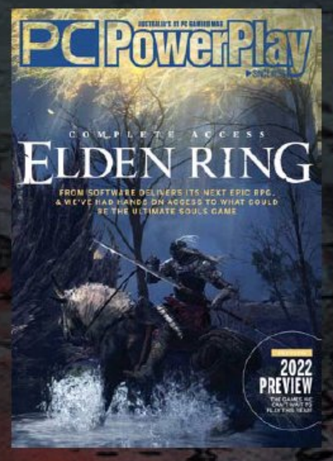
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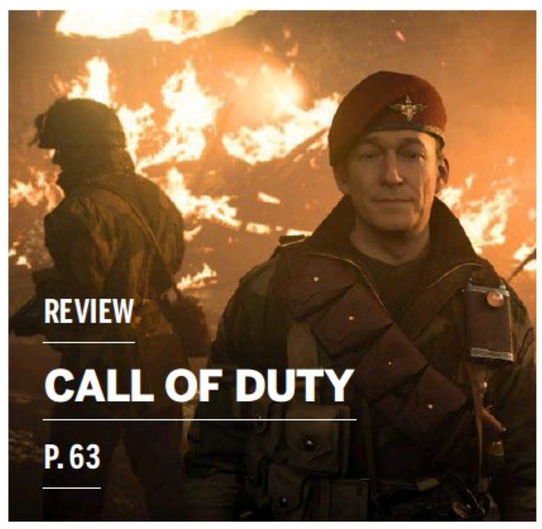

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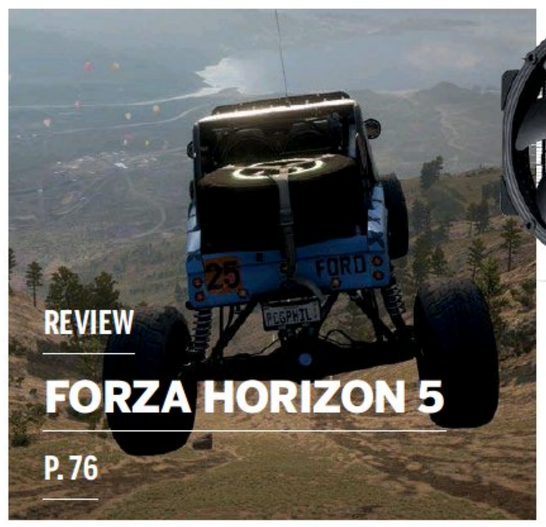

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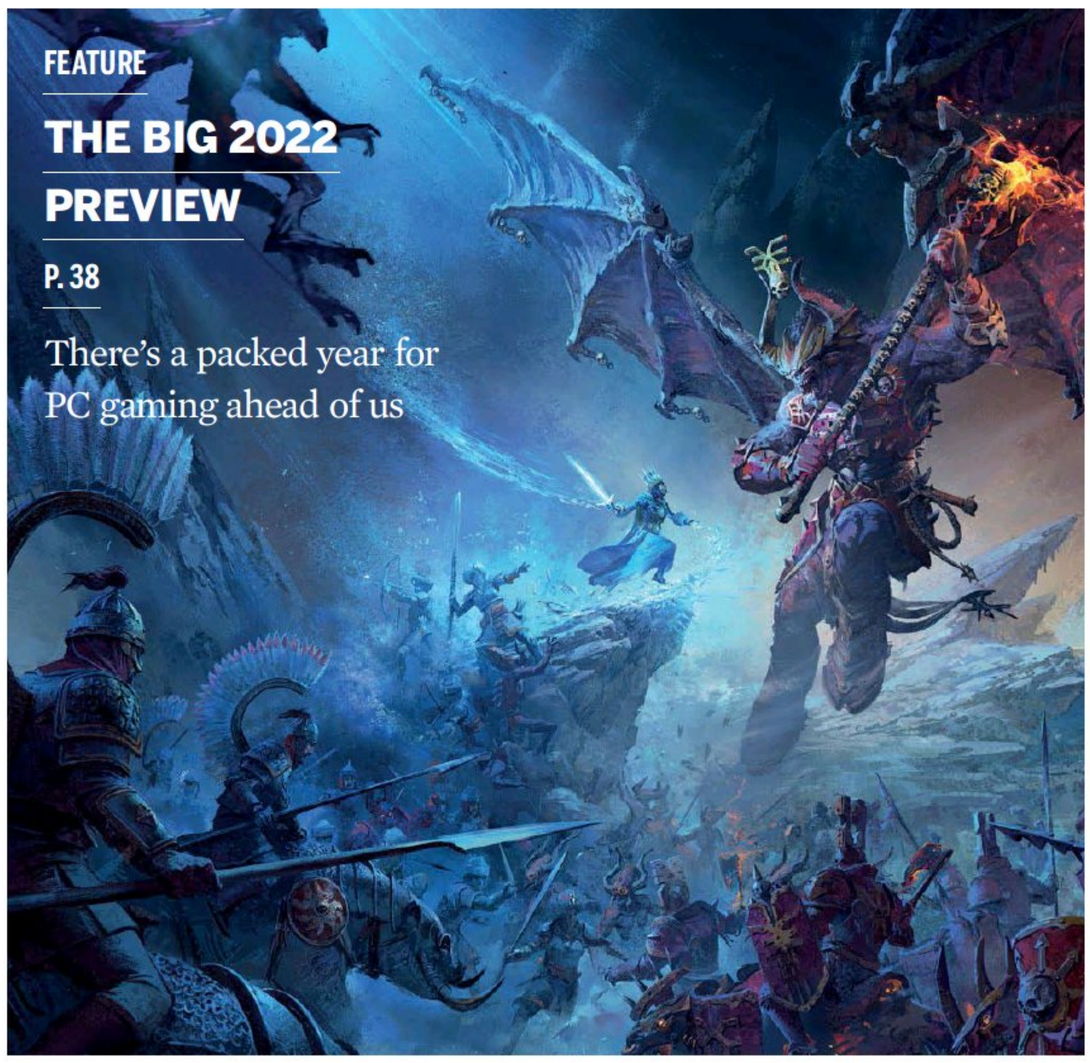

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BUNGIE CEO APOLOGISES FOLLOWING IN-DEPTH REPORT

Sexism and toxicity at the studio rampant.

A major new IGN report into workplace toxicity at Destiny 2 studio Bungie has prompted an apology from CEO Pete Parsons, who acknowledged that while the studio has made positive changes, "it is not enough, and it has taken too long."

In September, Parsons released a statement affirming Bungie's commitment "to fostering a safe and welcoming environment for everyone, and to making conscious and constant improvements through listening, self-awareness, improving our workplace and our systems, and by acting on behalf of our people." The statement was prompted by the events of "these past few months," he said, but it was a clear reference to the allegations of widespread misconduct at Activision Blizzard.

Parsons' statement painted a very positive picture of life at Bungie, but according to the IGN report it didn't go over well with many employees. Interviews with 26 current and former employees reveal a culture rife with overt sexism and a "boys' club culture," heavy crunch, and protection of abusers.

Android games on Windows will let you swap from mobile to PC

Google will bring mobile games to Windows devices in 2022.

Soon you'll be able to play a game on your Android device and then pick up where you left off on your PC. Google announced that it will bring a Google Play app to Windows 10 and 11 devices next year, allowing you to play both emulated and natively-designed Android games on your PC for the first time.

The service won't stream games through the cloud or a Wi-Fi connection. Instead, it'll let you access Google's own app store – just like you can do on tablets and Chromebooks currently – and install games on your Windows devices.

"This will be a native Windows app distributed by Google, which will support Windows 10 and up," Google's product director of games on Android told The Verge. Windows 11 PCs already technically have official access to Android games via a test version of the Amazon Appstore. Only about 50 apps are available on the store, and they don't appear to sync with any other devices.

It Takes Two wins GOTY at The Game Awards

It beat Deathloop, Resident Evil Village, and Psychonauts 2, among others.

It Takes Two has won Game of the Year at the 2021 Game Awards. It Takes Two has a unique premise. It casts two players as soon-to-be-divorced parents Cody and May. Their daughter isn't happy about this imminent divorce, so she transforms them into dolls with the help of Dr. Hakim, a sentient, wise cracking self-help relationship book. What follows is a series of dramatic set pieces that all require close collaboration.

"Streaming isn't work"

Says one of the world's most successful streamers.

Esports legend Shroud downplayed the effort required to be a Twitch streamer while doing a commentary when some viewers asked if he had any intention to return to professional esports, to which he replied he wouldn't want to because, "working sucks – streaming is work? No it's not f****** work, it's a god damned joke. Look, I'm sitting here doing nothing."

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FUTURE

DUNE: SPICE WARS BRINGS THE BATTLES OF THE HARKONNEN AND ATREIDES TO PC

Spice up your life.

Dune: Spice Wars is a 4X strategy game coming to Steam in early access next year.

At The Game Awards last December, Funcom unveiled a brand new trailer for Dune: Spice Wars (which you can check out on YouTube). Right now at least, the new strategy game appears to be exclusive to PC, arriving through early access on Steam at some point next this year.

Unfortunately, the brief announcement trailer for the new game by Conan Exiles developer Funcom gives away very little about the game itself. It opens with an almost birds eye view of the vast sands of Arrakis, before showing Arrakeen under attack by invading spacecraft.

Then, the camera pans out to reveal the entire world held in a very firm grip by an unseen character. Emperor, is that you? Hopefully we won't be waiting too long to find out which factions will feature in Dune: Spice Wars, as well as whether any characters from Frank Herbert's saga will be making an appearance. The game is also based on the book, not the recent Denis Villeneuve film.

Sniper Elite 5 coming to PS5, Xbox Series X, last-gen consoles, and PC in 2022

And the kill cam is more brutal than ever.

Sniper Elite 5 was announced during December's ID@Xbox stream, and it's coming to Xbox Series X, PS5, Xbox One, PS4, and PC (via Steam, the Epic Games Store, and the Windows Store) in 2022.

The announcement trailer for Sniper Elite 5 promises a simultaneous multi-platform release and introduces the starring crew of US Rangers who are sent to Brittany, France to weaken some fortified walls in a pretty standard mission in 1944. However, following the discovery of a Nazi project dubbed Operation Kraken, our hero, Karl Fairburne, moves to take out Nazi officers and pre-empt the operation. You've got three guesses as to how he'll take them out. Spoilers: sniping, more sniping, and also some close-quarters stealth.

Rebellion is leaning into real-world locations with Sniper Elite 5, promising "a living, immersive environment" enriched by photogrammetry (that is, digital environments recreated using actual spaces as a template). There are more ways to get around those fancy environments, too, like ziplines, sliding, and improved climbing.

PlayStation Studios adds God of War co-developer Valkyrie Entertainment to its ranks

Sony's latest studio acquisition is Valkyrie Entertainment, a co-development specialist which has contributed to the God of War franchise among many other games. PlayStation Studios boss Hermen Hulst announced the purchase via Twitter, saying that Valkyrie's order of business as part of the company is "making invaluable contributions to key PlayStation Studios franchises."

PUBG studio hiring for an unannounced AAA game

Playerunknown's Battlegrounds studio Krafton is developing a new AAA game. As was first reported in December by Exputer, Krafton appears to be staffing up for an unannounced AAA game. Chiefly, a job listing on Krafton's website for a Senior Animator confirms that a potential new employee would be working on a "new unannounced project." Secondly, there's another job listing on Krafton's official website for a Senior Technical Sound Designer.

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FUNNY MONEY

The whole world has gone mad for NFTs, and it's only going to get worse...

Even Philip K. Dick could not have predicted a future this stupid. Hold on to your yarbles – 2022 is gonna be wild.

Most of us would prefer not to think about NFTs, but these days it's unavoidable. Non-Fungible Tokens have invaded the world of video games, and our news feeds are polluted with breathless prose describing how the blockchain will make our hobby so, so much better.

NFTs are supposedly an iron-clad, fool-proof means of asserting the ownership of digital goods. But that's simply not true – intellectual property gets stolen for use as NFTs all the time. Every day one reads social media posts from angry artists who've had works pilfered from their online image galleries, only to be melted down into crypto, pumped, and dumped. The exchanges that trade in NFTs are sluggish and indifferent when it comes to enforcing the rights of artists, so theft and fraud proliferate.

This is not an abstract threat – NFT content theft has struck close to home. None other than Daniel Hindes, a former editor of this very magazine, has fallen victim to this cruel crime du jour. Hindes is now an independent game developer, and he recently discovered that the key art for his game Wildfire had been filched by an entrepreneur with very sticky fingers.

In the end he was able to get the stolen art taken down, but it was still an affront, an insult, a violation – and something that normal, law-abiding people just shouldn't have to deal with.

Aside from facilitating pyramid schemes built on theft, NFTs also consume vast amounts of electricity, and for this sin alone many are calling for the controversial technology to be banned outright. S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2 was originally going to use NFTs, until a massive public outcry forced GSC Game World to abandon the initiative.

The abrupt 180° turn proved two things. One: ordinary consumers can affect positive change when they speak up. And Two: the game never needed NFTs in the first place – it was all a gimmick.

Ubisoft has been quite shameless in implementing NFTs, via their new 'Quartz' platform. In a recent interview, Ubisoft founder Yves Guillemot said that he didn't understand what the fuss was all about. The French businessman pointed out that NFTs are just another new technology, like micro-transactions or loot crates.

In a sense, he's right. NFTs are indeed just like micro-transactions and loot crates – they suck. They're predatory, they're tawdry, and they're completely superfluous to a quality video game experience.

This ridiculous trend has once again proved Chris Roberts to be the greatest game designer of all time. We're now on the cusp of the 10th anniversary of the announcement of Star Citizen, a game that can never disappoint its backers because it will never be released.

Star Citizen is a game of unparalleled innovation. When other games offered micro-transactions, Chris Roberts pioneered macro-transactions, giving his fans the opportunity to spend thousands of dollars on in-game items. But after all these years, most of the spaceships he's sold have not been implemented in-game. They exist only as concept art – jpegs. These jpegs of spaceships are only released for sale in strictly limited tranches, and there's a thriving grey market for the resale of said jpegs. In a sense, Chris Roberts invented the NFT! No wonder people have sunk over half a billion dollars into Star Citizen.

In contrast, Peter Molyneux has only grossed US$54 Million or so from his new NFT-based online game, which seems to be some sort of cross between Second Life and Populous. Like Roberts, Molyneux understands that actually delivering a game can only lead to fan disappointment, which is why he never finished making Godus. This was very compassionate of him, but until he can sell half a billion dollars worth of goblin jpegs he will never truly be a first-rate game designer.

These money grubbing schemes may seem to be the height of lunacy, but as bad as things are, it can always get worse. There are some alarmists out there who say that soon absolutely everything will be on the blockchain, linked to an insidious social credit system. Publish a tweet saying that Bill Gates's pink jumpers look hideous and the title deed to your house will be automatically revoked. Hopefully things won't get that bad...

Hate them or loathe them, NFTs aren't going anywhere, because the world economy is in a very parlous state. Inflation has returned, and depending on how you measure it, we're already experiencing hyper-inflation. The more money they print, the more desperate punters will be driven to invest what little dosh they have in jpegs of monkeys.

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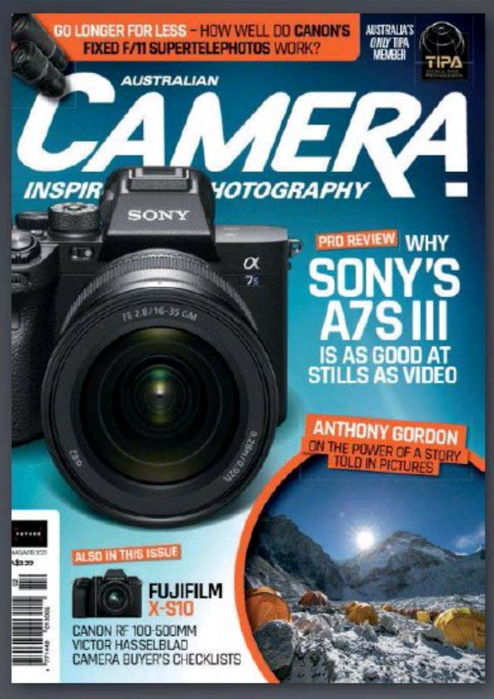
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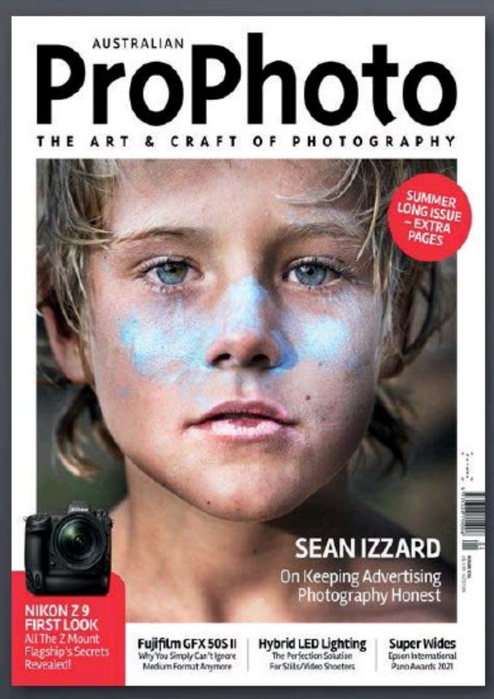
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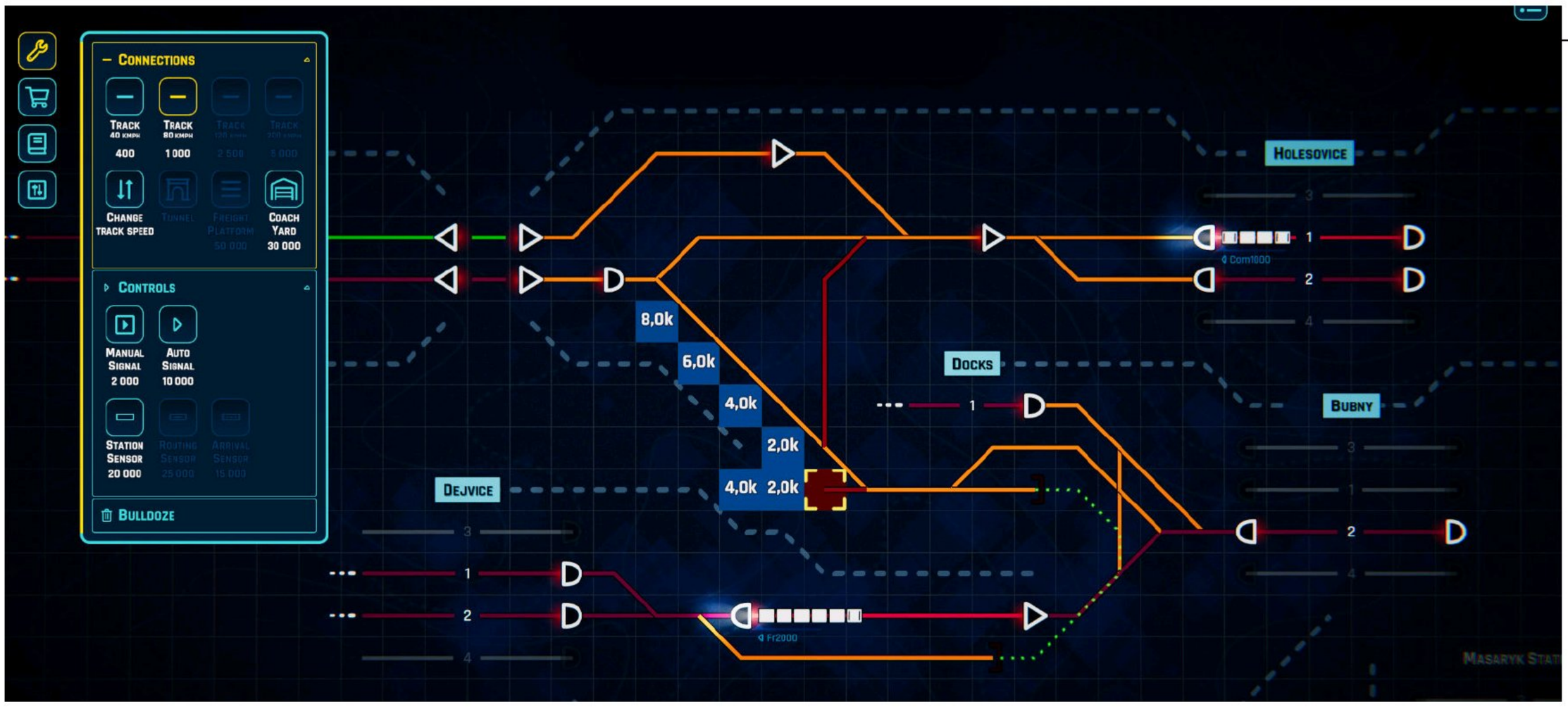


ONE TRACK MIND

When only a train sim will do.

When I reviewed Mini Motorways in the last magazine, I realised that I'd never given in to the overwhelming, compulsive desire that Mini Metro had created within me; to rediscover old train sims. I think Young Meghann must have been cleverer than me, because these old interfaces are hard to understand. I've now played everything from the original Railroad Tycoon to Sid Meier's Railroads(!). Even just placing tracks has been an adventure. Do not get me started on double tracking. How did we survive before tooltips? Tell me that.

Did I enjoy myself? Yes, I did. My favourite thing about the original Railroad Tycoon was always choosing the best starting point on a randomly generated map; chaining resources, counting city tiles and so on. Next, I was reminded that Railroad Tycoon II can become beautifully complex, with patience and micromanagement. I don't remember playing III and it was more of the same, but I did enjoy a couple of hours with Railroads(!) and its additional economic layers, even if it ultimately seemed too easy. (Interface notwithstanding.)

And so, when I saw the early access game, Rail Route, I was suitably primed for it. It's also quite impenetrable, but 'making things easier for yourself' is the game's entire premise. It's less a 'train sim' and more a 'train signalling sim'. The story (on endless), which I entirely imagined (because this game is just lines and shapes), goes something like this. You're a dispatcher with only the most basic of equipment. Prague (or another city) has decided to outsource its overflow to 'the cheap guy'. You take what contracts you can get and gradually build an ever fancier network.

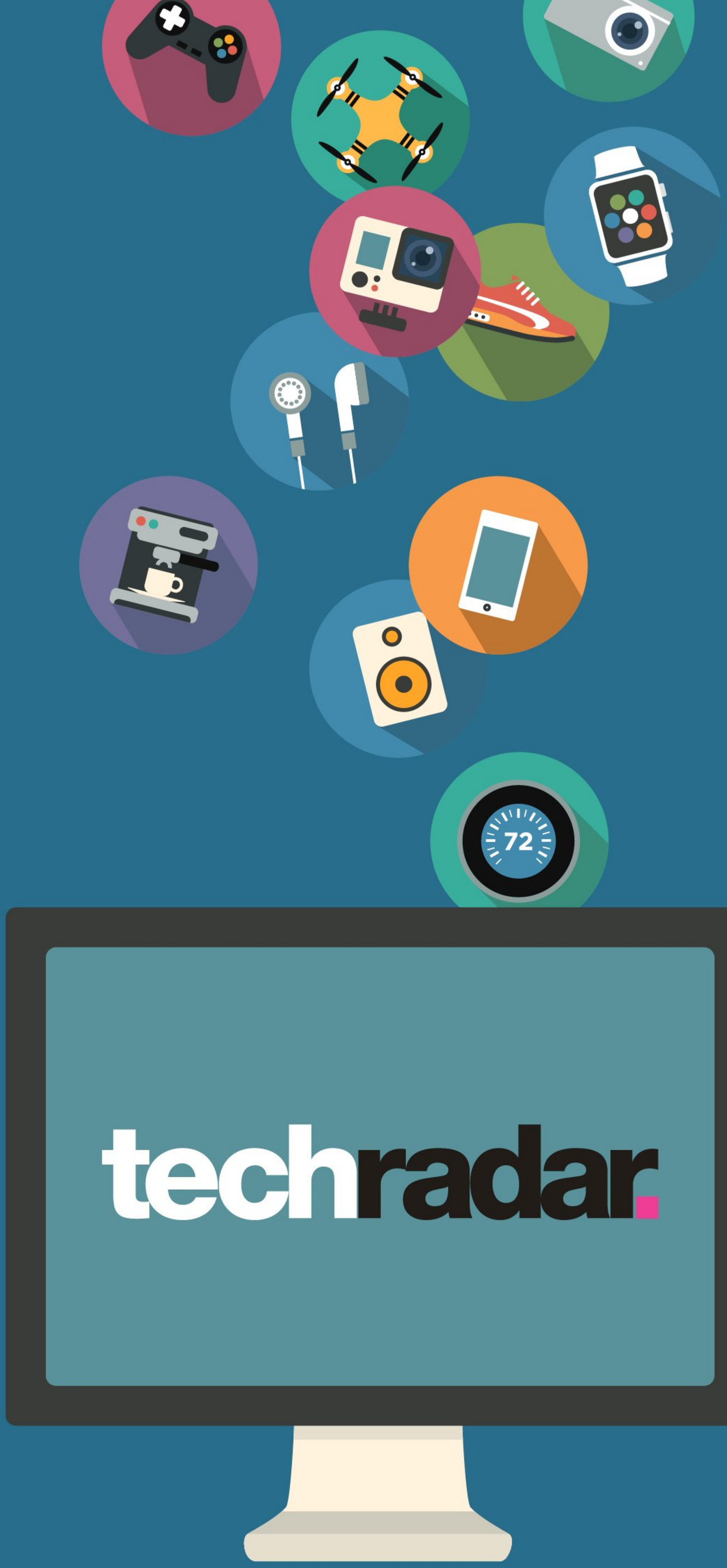
On my first few attempts, I was flicking basic signals to green, assigning trains to platforms and tracks, and killing lots of innocent passengers (which is a fail state). Every piece requires interaction, although you can manage the difficulty by accepting contracts slowly. As routes are completed you earn two kinds of tokens and buy from the weirdest upgrade tree I've ever seen. As well as unlocking more interesting contracts, you might upgrade an aspect of automation, or buy literally just a sound effect that goes "clack" when a train is stopped at a signal.

It's not an exaggeration to say that I dispatched mindlessly (but happily) for 20 minutes, just to buy the Command Chain upgrade. This allowed me to remove one mouse click from how I had to manually assign one train, on the hour, even though this train still required four other signals, or tracks, to be clicked upon anyway. Why? If I failed to recognise this particular train on approach, then accidentally auto-signaled it to Bubny, I'd have to painstakingly direct it back to Dejvice through the (otherwise relatively) orderly mess of allocated traffic. One click can mean a lot.

Eventually, you can automate nearly everything. Arrival, departure and routing censors, which change ALL signals based on a passing train's destination, are a revelation. Is my rail route fully automated? Gosh, no. I have dedicated lines and autonomous loops, but coachyards (which store and release engines) and urban transit (where trains circle a hub station) remain tricky. What I love most about Rail Route is that I'm intimately familiar with every click my network still needs, but I'd hand you this save and you'd mess up its management immediately.

I think the desire that Mini Metro (fun as it is) actually left me with wasn't so much to rediscover Railroad Tycoon, but the ability to create a railroad that's mine, all mine. From spitefully blocking, or outpacing, a competitor in the original games, to the thrill of incrementally selective automation, I may have gone mad with power. You can keep your mighty weapons and fearsome dragons. I'm going to sit here with my tea and click exactly once to ensure the 2.57pm COM6896 from Masaryk to Dejvice gets onto the correct track and everyone arrives safely. PC

Meghann O'Neill used to name trains that broke speed records after her teenage crushes. This time she had to name them all "Ken" (after her loving, long term partner). How boring!



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MAP QUEST

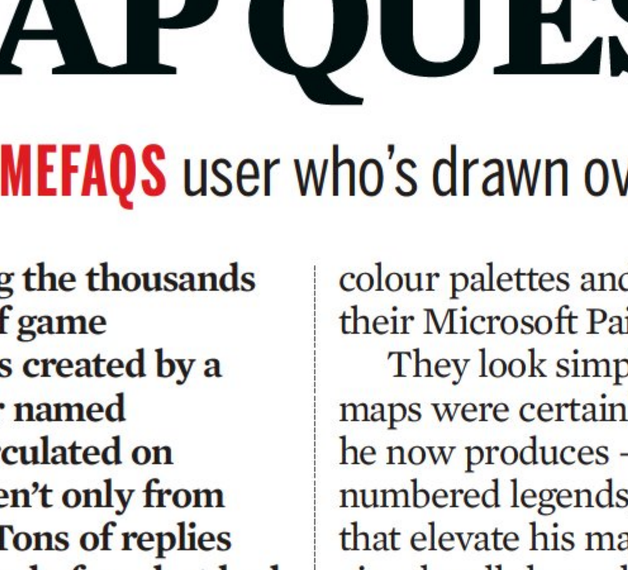
The diehard GAMEFAQS user who's drawn over 3,500 maps

When a post praising the thousands upon thousands of game walkthrough maps created by a GameFAQs poster named StarFighters76 circulated on Twitter, the astounded responses weren't only from people seeing them for the first time. Tons of replies were from players who'd used his maps before, but had no idea just how many he'd created. "These maps have gotten me out of SO MANY jams bro," says one. "Shout if you've been using these maps for the FF Pixel Remasters," says another. The collection of over 3,500 maps that StarFighters76 has created is impressive, but the number of players he's helped through more than 300 games may be even more so.

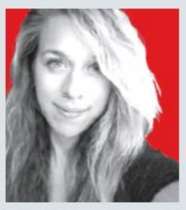
For nearly 20 years, StarFighters76 has been posting maps to GameFAQs, one of the few surviving institutions from the '90s era of videogame websites. Although his maps have changed some over the years, it's no surprise that people recognised them. Since the early 2000s, StarFighters76 has created maps with bright, basic colour palettes and thin black lines that make no secret of their Microsoft Paint origins.

They look simplistic at first – and some of his early maps were certainly more pared-down versions of what he now produces – but even his early work contains numbered legends, helpful arrows, and other instructions that elevate his maps from artistic recreations to actual visual walkthroughs with puzzle solutions and directed paths. They stand out on GameFAQs, which most of us associate with guides submitted as plain text files.

"I actually use the old school MSPaint, like from the early 2000s," StarFighters76 says. Aside from being an antique, old-school Paint really isn't a forgiving program. He could keep his visual style while using a program that adds flexibility with layers and more powerful tools. "I should, honestly," he says when I ask if he's ever considered changing. "But MSPaint has been with me since day one and hasn't let me down yet so I don't want to turn my back on it."

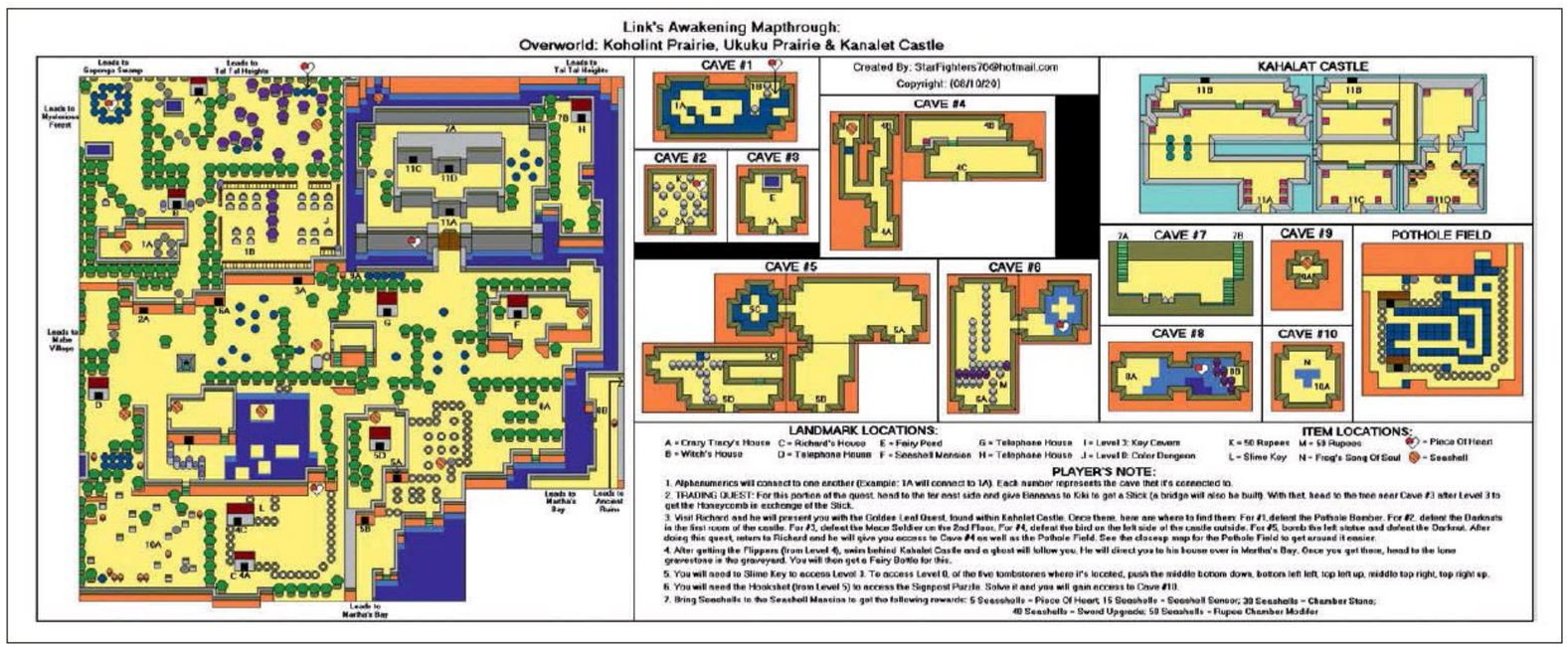

Final Fantasy 4 Mapthrough:
Antlion Cave
Created By: StarFighters76@hotmail.com
Copyright: (05/22/07)
BASEMENT 1
BASEMENT 2
START
ANTLION'S NEST
BOSS
LEGEND:
A = Potion
B = Silk Web
C = Tent
D = Potion
E = Potion
F = Soft
G = Notus
H = Lamia
I = Hourglass 1
J = Silk Web
K = Life
L = Ether 1
M = Exit
START = Starting Point
BOSS = Octomamm
PLAYER'S NOTE:
1. Numbers will connect to one another (Example: 1 will connect to 1).
2. After you defeat the Octomamm boss, you will get the Sand Ruby. Make sure you save the Exit item you got earlier in this cave, and use it after defeating the boss, so that you don't have to journey all the way back to the start of this cave.

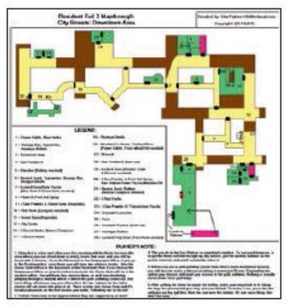
Like his choice of software, StarFighters76 says that his process has largely remained unchanged all these years too. He starts out by drawing a game map out on paper



FAQs facts

GameFAQs originated as the Video Game FAQ Archive created by Jeff 'CJayC' Veasey in 1995, accepting requests and volunteer submissions for game guides and answers. By the time StarFighters76 started posting maps, it was already the go-to for thousands of players. Today, it hosts a database of guides and answers for over 200,000 games.


Link's Awakening Mapthrough:
Overworld: Koholint Prairie, Ukuku Prairie & Kanalet Castle
Created By: StarFighters76@hotmail.com
Copyright: (08/10/20)
CAVE #1
CAVE #2
CAVE #3
CAVE #4
CAVE #5
CAVE #6
CAVE #7
CAVE #8
CAVE #9
CAVE #10
KAHALAT CASTLE
POTHOLE FIELD
LANDMARK LOCATIONS:
A = Crazy Tracy's House
B = Witch's House
C = Richard's House
D = Telephone House
E = Fairy Pool
F = Seashell Mansion
G = Telephone House
H = Telephone House
I = Level 3: Key Cavern
J = Level 8: Color Dungeon
ITEM LOCATIONS:
K = 50 Rupees
L = Slime Key
M = 50 Rupees
N = Frog's Song Of Soul
= Piece Of Heart
= Seashell
PLAYER'S NOTE:
1. Alphanumerics will connect to one another (Example: 1A will connect to 1A). Each number represents the cave that it's connected to.
2. TRADING QUEST: For this portion of the quest, head to the far east side and give Bananas to Kiki to get a Stick (a bridge will also be built). With that, head to the tree near Cave #3 after Level 3 to get the Honeycomb in exchange of the Stick.
3. Visit Richard and he will present you with the Golden Leaf Quest, found within Kahalat Castle. Once there, here are where to find them: For #1, defeat the Pothole Bomber. For #2, defeat the Darknuts in the first room of the castle. For #3, defeat the Mace Soldier on the 2nd Floor. For #4, defeat the bird on the left side of the castle outside. For #5, bomb the left statue and defeat the Darknut. After doing this quest, return to Richard and he will give you access to Cave #4 as well as the Pothole Field. See the closeup map for the Pothole Field to get around it easier.
4. After getting the Flippers (from Level 4), swim behind Kahalat Castle and a ghost will follow you. He will direct you to his house over in Martha's Bay. Once you get there, head to the lone gravestone in the graveyard. You will then get a Fairy Bottle for this.
5. You will need to Slime Key to access Level 3. To access Level 0, of the five tombstones where it's located, push the middle bottom down, bottom left left, top left up, middle top right, top right up.
6. You will need the Hookshot (from Level 5) to access the Signpost Puzzle. Solve it and you will gain access to Cave #10.
7. Bring Seashells to the Seashell Mansion to get the following rewards: 5 Seashells = Piece Of Heart; 15 Seashells = Seashell Sensor; 30 Seashells = Chamber Stone;
40 Seashells = Sword Upgrade; 50 Seashells = Rupee Chamber Modifier

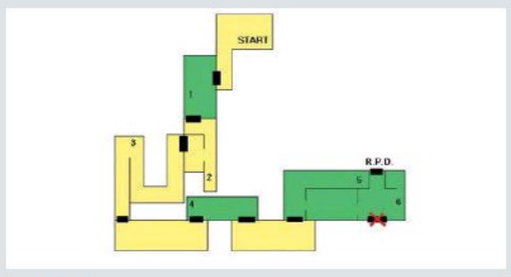


FAR LEFT: StarFighter76's maps of *Link's Awakening* are as artistic as they are instructive.

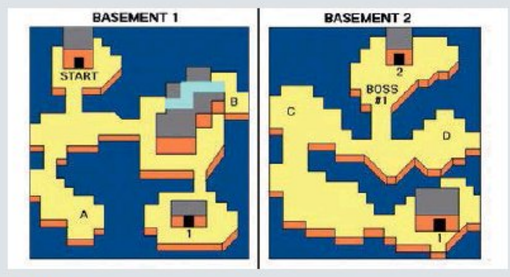
ABOVE LEFT: Even with a boxy layout and basic colours, you might recognise this Raccoon City map.

LEFT: For an even greater challenge, StarFighters76 took on the fully 3D world of *Super Mario 64*.

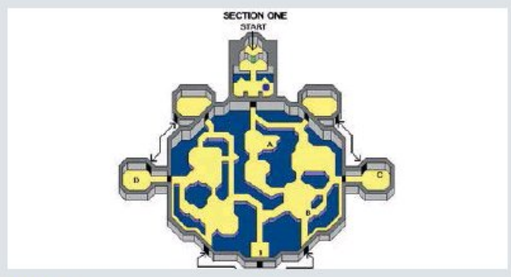
MAP EXPANSION *How StarFighters76's maps have evolved over 20 years*



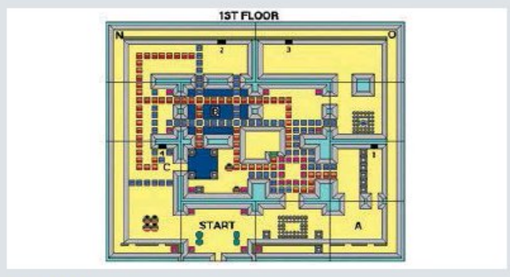
2004
The map of the Raccoon City Streets in *Resident Evil 2* uses annotations and some basic colours as direction.



2007
The Cave of Bahamut in *Final Fantasy IV* includes pseudo 3D and some complementary colours for clarity.



2013
By 2013, this map of *Chrono Trigger*'s Ocean Palace uses more complex shapes, pseudo 3D, and pattern effects.



2020
Another *Link's Awakening* map from 2020, the Eagle's Tower, shows an eye for detail and consistency.

while he plays, taking notes that he'll need for later. Eventually he switches over to recreating those sketches in Paint, going back and forth between drawing and playing.

"The game itself has to catch my attention in some way for me to work on it," he says. "Whether it's the game itself, or the particular layout of the game, there has got to be that special something that pulls me in." In *Resident Evil*, navigation is actually part of the game's puzzle. For the early *Zelda* games, it's a joy just to see entire game areas contiguously laid out in a way that only a good map can make immediately comprehensible.

"It's much more fun to map things out while exploring something new, because I am always curious about what's around the corner to discover," he says, though he's also worked on mapping out some old favourites. "It gives me a chance to relive the fun I had with them, as well as appreciate those games for what they are."

"IT'S MUCH MORE FUN TO MAP THINGS OUT WHILE EXPLORING SOMETHING NEW"

STAR CONTRIBUTOR

StarFighters76 has been posting his maps on GameFAQs for nearly 20 years, giving his work nearly the same longevity as the site itself. "GameFAQs was the first gaming site I went to when looking for help," he says. "It's kinda become my internet home."

StarFighters76 originally created written walkthroughs too. Some of his old guides still contain hallmarks of the early 2000s era: large text art introductions and maps recreated in text form. Despite those early walkthroughs and his continued practice of creating maps that contain text notes, the act of mapping is what he truly enjoys.

"I've been into mapping since I was a teenager," StarFighters76 says, explaining how he would explore nearby neighbourhoods as a kid and has since recreated his own map of his city multiple times. "Because I have taught myself how to navigate throughout my city, friends have literally called me their 'human GPS.'"

That sense of dedication is the connecting factor in how StarFighters76 talks about every part of his lengthy history drawing maps. There's something to envy in that ongoing commitment. I've always wanted to be someone who could say I'd been posting on the same message boards for a decade. Over where the grass appears greener, StarFighter76 says it isn't just sunshine all the time.

"After I reached 3,000 maps back in 2019, I wasn't sure what I was gonna do," he says. "Don't get me wrong, the art of game mapping is fun by itself. But doing it for 20 years can get to me at times because I feel like I've done all I could do, even though there is tons more I could be doing."

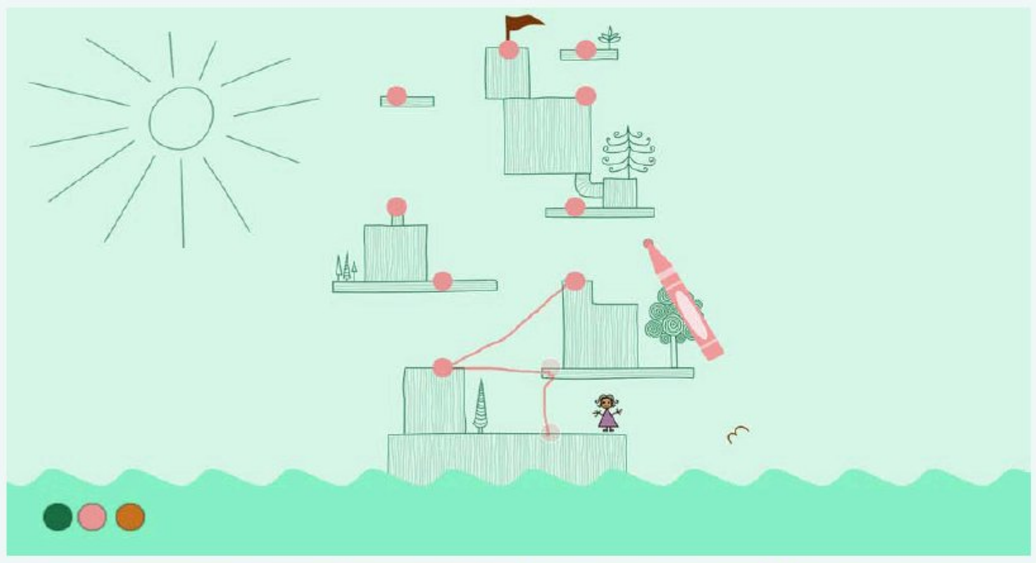
The wave of gratitude for Starfighter76's maps spurred by that tweet changed things for him. Players who remembered his maps showed up in droves to comment their thanks. The amount of attention it gathered caught him by surprise. "I needed that," he says. "Being on Twitter has helped give me that boost in motivation just a bit."

With 3,519 maps currently to his name on GameFAQs, StarFighters76 has spent two decades dedicated to his style. Here's hoping that a quick injection of internet appreciation carries him through to 4,000 and beyond. ■

Lauren Morton

A COLLECTION ASIDE

Optimistic enough to book a hostel, but realistic enough not to book flights, MEGHANN O'NEILL had to cancel her plans to attend PAX Australia for the second consecutive year, due to Covid-19. She invited Australian and New Zealand developers into her living room for Zoom interviews, and was impressed by the breadth and quality of what was on offer in 2021. This year's assistant, MAE UDARBE, documented around 40 games over six hours and (somehow) wants to come back for more (hopefully in person) next year. In this collection you'll find that no genre is repeated. Many of the games are unique, hybrid or uncategorisable, in terms of genre, too. Keep up the great work, ANZ developers!



What are you waiting for, droid?
Come get me, droid
Doesn't look that scary.
What do we do now?
What are you waiting for, droid?
Come get me, droid
Doesn't look that scary.
What do we do now?

BLUEBERRY

DEVELOPER Mellow Games **PRICE** TBA
AVAILABILITY TBA **WEBSITE** https://mellow-games.com/games/blueberry/

I'm sure I've said this before, but I'm bad at platformers. Blueberry is a comfortable, no-fail experience. You respawn at your last position, rather than at a prior checkpoint. I'm tempted to say that platforming isn't what this game is about, but it can be. Failure is too. Imagine being four years old and hungry. The kitchen benches and shelves loom above, ready to be navigated by weak jumps and placement of large pots and pans. If you can't make it, the world loses its colour, the memory becomes especially sad, but the story and action will progress, regardless.

You're piecing together a troubled past. In the preview build, you're also a teen. There are many decisions to make. Will you help Mum or buy an outfit for the party? Will you drink alcohol? How much will you drink? Your actions can hurt others and they can hurt you, in a way that's baked into the health (or possibly, heartbreak) meter. Many games use food to boost health, but Blueberry also comments on whether it's healthy to use food in this way. As the story becomes circular, and you revisit earlier events, you might even have the chance to make amends.

What is all of this soul searching for? You're also a mum who wants to do the best for her son but (it seems) you haven't been given a great example. There's a moment (as a child) when you're gleefully filling your distracted mum's trolley with biscuits, only to have caused great distress at the checkout. That's a pretty heavy memory. Not to mention having one's preschool artworks ignored and, you know, the alcoholism. Blueberry looks like a cute platformer. It's much more. It's moving, relatable and will play out a little differently for everyone.

WARP FRONTIER

DEVELOPER Brawsome **PRICE** $21.50 **AVAILABILITY** Released
WEBSITEhttp://www.brawsome.com.au/blog/index.php/games/warpfrontier/

It's your daughter's birthday, you're already late and you suddenly have to contend with a hostile hull breach, corpses in space and illegal consciousness transfers. It's all in a day's work, for a space cop, I guess. Via a series of interlocking missions and family drama, you'll thoroughly investigate a compelling plot. Tangential questions are raised. What happened on Cetus (and Earth)? Why does District 11 keep floating away from Rust's other 12 Districts? Why is your (ex) wife so stressed? Most don't require answers, they're just part of the game's rich backdrop.

The puzzles are sometimes brilliant, at least in hindsight, but the game doesn't communicate them well. As one example, I had to go outside my ship, through the airlock, but I wasn't wearing a helmet and couldn't find the helmet I'd previously been wearing. I was expected to pull a switch to remove air, without a helmet. (Then I appeared outside with a helmet.) You can access contextual hints, but it's disappointing to need one, when you've misunderstood what's required. The hint system also often spoils sequential puzzles, en route to the hint you need.

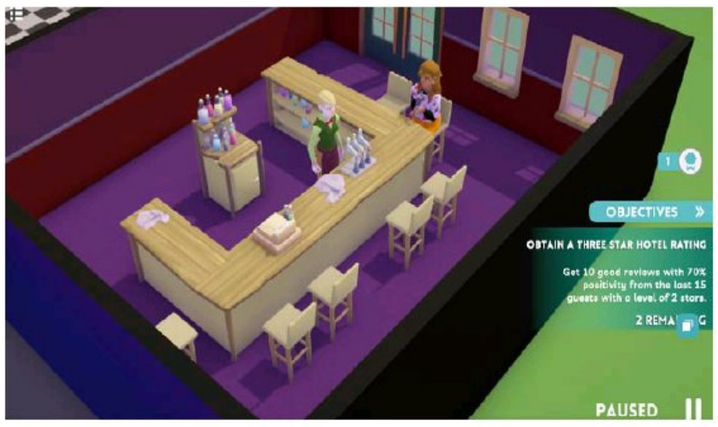
I finished Warp Frontier in the time I had available, thanks to the spoilers. They didn't detract from my experience, though. In fact, I found that engaging more conscientiously with lengthier puzzles was immersion breaking. I just wanted to learn more about the asteroid painter's artistic process, or such. The art and voice acting were endlessly wonderful and there's interesting developer commentary included, too. I was on the edge of my seat until the very end of Vince Cassini's extraordinary adventure, even if I played it faster than was intended.

NEIR:COGITO

DEVELOPER Silver Stitch **PRICE** Free
AVAILABILITY Released
WEBSITE https://silverstitch.itch.io/cogito

No, I have not played NeiR. Yes, everyone keeps telling me to. Is a competition-winning fan game (which has since been allowed to exist by Square Enix) the right place to start? Apparently so. I'm hooked. Why am I deciding whether refrigerators, puppies and angry people with garden tools are hostile? I'm definitely some kind of AI and I can only choose Y or N in any given situation, including to decide my name. Mostly, I'm presented with outrageous, sequentially-unfolding, moral dilemmas that I can't possibly understand.

Why is the piano loop so sad? (The sound across the entire experience is minimal and perfectly executed.) What is a Hostility Enhancement Learning Program? What did I do wrong? Perhaps these aren't "moral dilemmas", after all. Every word is so carefully placed. Even the multiple endings are uniquely evocative. I hope you understand the parts of NeiR:Cogito that went over my head and have found my brief rambling amusing. Please play this. I loved it. If the actual NeiR series is half as good, it really is time to play that, too.

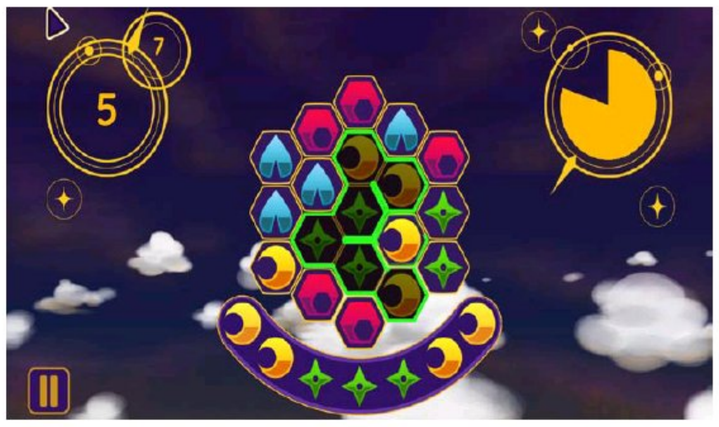

OBJECTIVES
OBTAIN A THREE STAR HOTEL RATING
Get 10 good reviews with 70% positivity from the last 15 guests with a level of 2 stars.
PAUSED

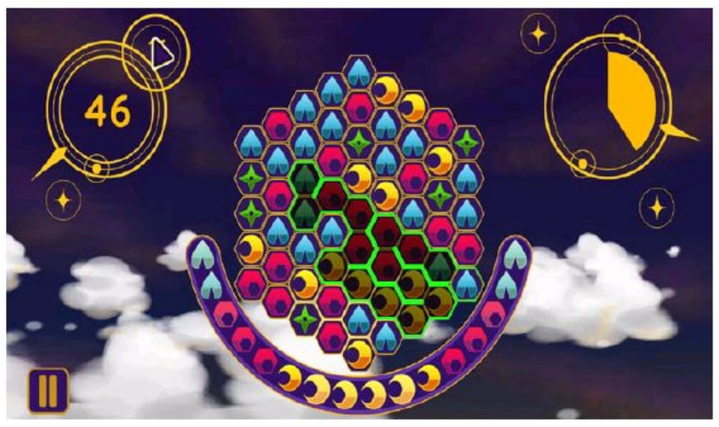
HOTEL MAGNATE

DEVELOPER Arcade Oven **PRICE** $34.99
AVAILABILITY Early Access
WEBSITEhttps://hotel-magnate.com/

Please. I'm not the only person in the world with the tycoon itch. In 2019, 1,231 backers pledged $71,153 in the hopes that Hotel Magnate would scratch theirs. It's currently in early access but I've already played this for longer than is justified by a 200 word preview. I've become fascinated by what guests do in their rooms; make gang signs, read, sleep with their shoes on. It's cool to choose wallpaper and floor (which Two Point Hospital doesn't allow) because (although a small detail) my hotel really feels like something I've created myself. Rainbow bathrooms? Why not?

Guests leave reviews which drive your hotel's star rating, unlocking new items and rooms. They need food, sleep and toilets (although, intriguingly, the staff don't), as well as having idiosyncratic traits to drive their behaviour. I enjoyed messing with the build tools, as well as seeing my hotel get larger, busier and more complex, but (currently) there are very few problems to solve. Hotel Magnate still seems early in development to me, but I'm cheering for it. The basic systems are in place, it simply needs more humour, specific challenges, maybe a bloaty head or two.



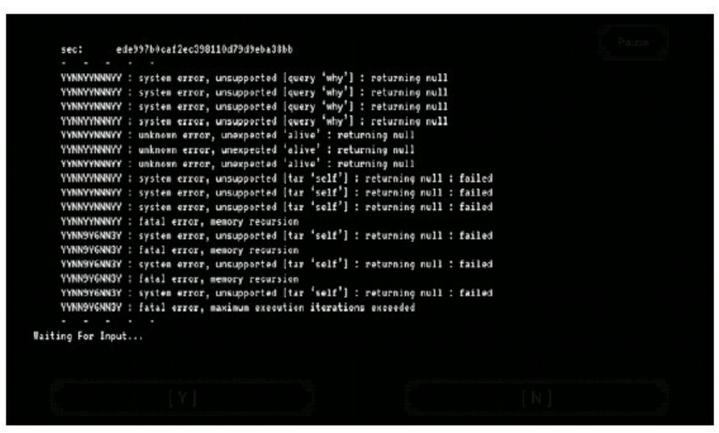


UFOTOFU:HEX

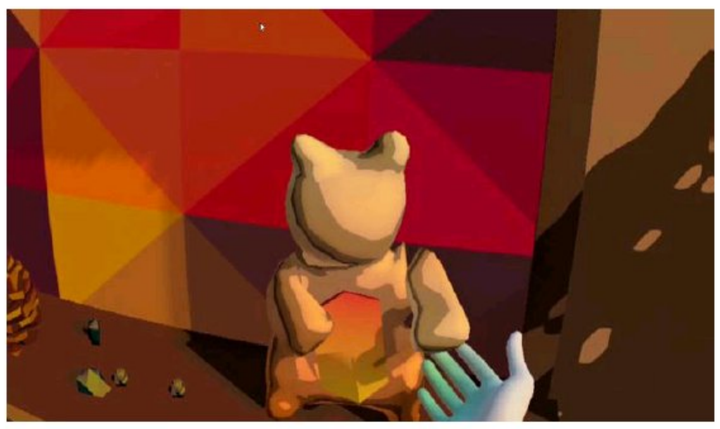
DEVELOPER Inflorescent Games **PRICE** $4.50
AVAILABILITY January 2021
WEBSITE https://inflo.games/projects/ufotofuhex/

I take the kids to Glenelg in Adelaide every year and they always complain that the word "Glenelg" is a palindrome for the sake of being a palindrome. It's not, it's someone's name. (Presumably a family who were named for the sake of palindromes.) UfoTofU:Hex is a matching game that ... totally has a palindromic name, too! It's about matching shapes and colours palindromically. Design is simple and elegant. Make palindromes, within the required number of turns, get a point for each tile used, tiles disappear and higher tiles drop into their place. (Then, beat your scores.)

The preview build has three levels, of varying sizes. It's challenging to find long palindromes on the smaller level, while decision-making is tougher on the larger level. There are a few limitations to your palindroming, like that you can't create palindromes within palindromes, if you get what I mean ... Today I also learned that an emordnilap is what you call something that can be read backwards to create a different word. That made me very angry. I presume emordnilaps will become a UfoTofU:Hex sequel somehow. Will I play it? Sit on a potato pan, Otis!



A collection aside



TOUCHY FEELY

DEVELOPER Samuel Tate **PRICE** Currently free
AVAILABILITY Released, but in development
WEBSITEhttps://sidequestvr.com/app/3108/touchy-feely

PAX is (almost) the only place I play VR. And recently, a relative described to me the loss of sensation in their hands, due to medication. So, when Samuel Tate arrived in our Zoom meeting with an Oculus Quest, using hand-tracking to explore a player's emotional experience of touch in a digital environment, I was immediately attentive. You obviously can't (actually) burn yourself on the hot frying pan, but he says that most players will nonetheless react to their expectation for an item's temperature, as well as the accompanying aural and visual feedback.

The player's response can be gestural, too. The hands are beautifully detailed and touching a cactus can look very different to patting a dog. There's something fascinating about having the ability to give (yet not receive) touch and Samuel plans to experiment with voice input to further connect players to these "sensory sketches". Touchy Feely may expand into a full story arc alongside his other experiments, including a digging simulator made simply to explore how good tools might feel. I'm intrigued by what we take for granted about touch and the tangential ways we experience it.

SHOW STATS
WAVE 20 - CHOOSE REWARD
Chaotic Doodad of Potency
-6% Enemy Resistance
Enemy and Tower chance-based effects occur +5% more frequently
+6% ENEMY MAX LIFE
Potent Doodad
-5% Enemy Resistance
+6% ENEMY RESISTANCE
Quick Doodad of Chaos
+6% Attack Speed
Enemy and Tower chance-based effects occur +4% more frequently
ENEMIES HAVE +9% CHANCE TO SPAWN AS A HOUND WITH -20% BASE LIFE AND +30% BASE SPEED

FRANKENSTORM

DEVELOPER Doodad Games **PRICE** Free
AVAILABILITY Released
WEBSITE https://doodad.games/frankenstorm

You're creating a monster and the townsfolk aren't cool about it. Why can't you block their path if you're trying to stop them? Why do unlockable, prohibitive gadgets make you more powerful but also buff the enemy? I'm going to put this strange behaviour down to being a mad scientist, because Frankenstorm is extremely fun. It's tower defence, but in a way that evolves fast. The wave arrives, behaves predictably, you choose one of three "rewards" that make your life both easier and harder at the same time, all in a matter of seconds.

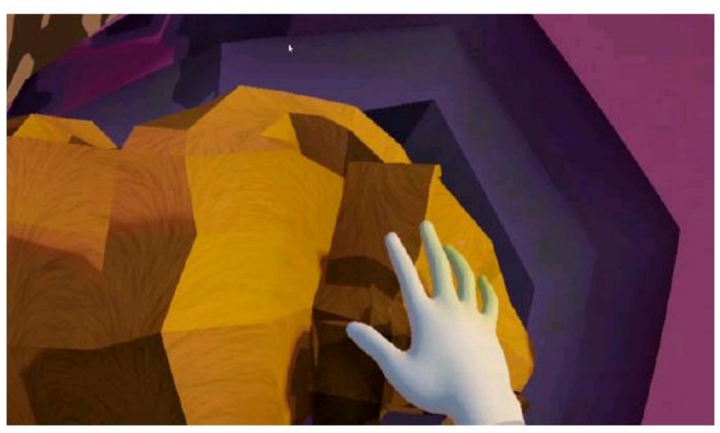
All of the killboxes I've made in RimWorld have been preparing me for this moment. It quickly becomes clear that strategic placement is everything. (Luckily, you can reclaim and rebuild at any time.) I enjoyed when I was in a precarious position, but then reworked the maze and was safe once again. I would suggest that choosing the rewards that give new towers and wires is a safer way to play, but I enjoyed chaos. The balancing in this game is intense. But why do townsfolk turn off each switch, even after they're already turned off?! Best not to overthink it.

PALLAS OF VINES

DEVELOPER Lamplight Forest **PRICE** TBA
AVAILABILITY TBA
WEBSITE https://pallasofvines.com/index.html

Pallas of Vines evokes an "aural exam" for me; being jealous of people with perfect pitch and obsessively audiating abstract motifs, before committing to an answer. As a trained musician, and now an aural teacher myself, I'm excited to find these puzzles relatively challenging. The primary engagement is to repeat musical phrases, via keypress, across 12 choices of pitch. The intervals are unusual and solutions are sometimes (deliberately) jarring against seamlessly shifting, consonant but colourful, musical backgrounds. It's like Loom on Expert (and then some).

The experience sounds beautiful, and if not always beautiful, meaningful. I especially love that the door between the first and second gardens alters the register, texture and brightness of the timbres. I noticed additive stems, like moving arpeggios when you're ascending on a magical platform, as well as how golden balls sound in relation to level music. You'll hear failure before you see it. Many of my tertiary composition students have trouble engaging with aural processes. Perhaps Pallas of Vines is my new aural exam. I'll be really interested to see it at a full release.



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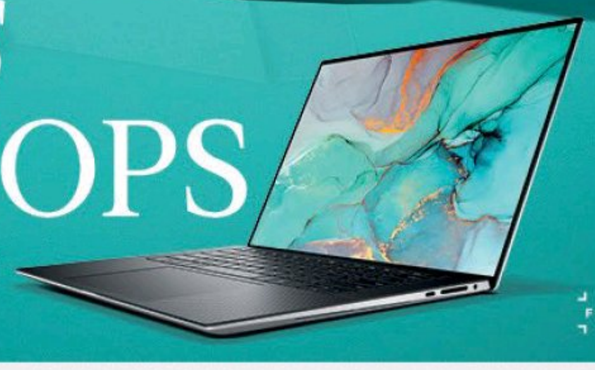

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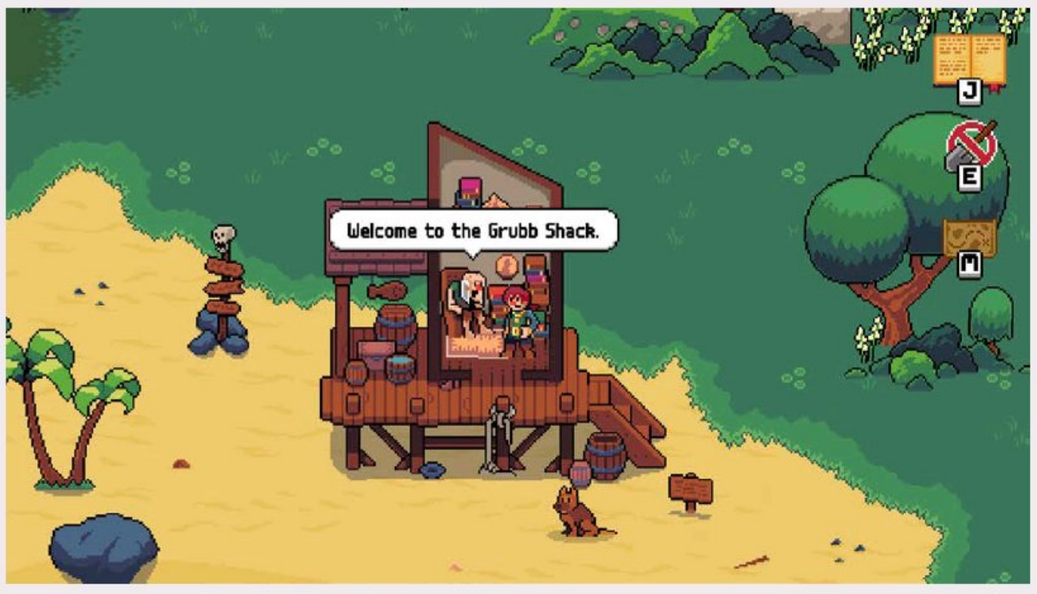


BILKINS' FOLLY

DEVELOPER Webbysoft **PRICE** TBA **AVAILABILITY** TBA
WEBSITE https://store.steampowered.com/app/1526370/Bilkins_Folly/

You know when you're given the ability to dig for treasure, but then it only happens once the entire game? Heroes of Might and Magic is guilty of this. Digging for treasure is the primary mechanic in Bilkins' Folly, however, and it's endlessly fun to do. Usually, solving sequential puzzles (via treasure maps) provides context. But I've found some cool stuff, just as a result of noticing visual clues, like stones in a ring (maybe to remind someone where they buried something). There's even a treasure hunting competition! (Just in case you weren't treasure hunting enough.)

It's so exciting to stare at a map, have no idea what the abstract markings mean, then realise you're walking past the same giant crab and four trees depicted on it. You're Percy Bilkins, youngest in a long line of treasure hunters and you're tasked with everything from finding a shovel, to following the complex trail of clues left by your grandfather. But it's Drayton, your trusty canine crew member (with a nose to sniff out diggables), who steals the show. Not only can you pat him, he's also the butt of every second joke and a terrible sheep dog.

Bilkins' Folly is early in development but the preview build is already gigantic. I've unlocked four multi-part sections to the main quest and six silly side quests, almost without solving anything. Connecting maps to terrain requires familiarity, so I've been exploring. Do you remember that moment on the trail from Britain to Yew in Ultima 7, when you suddenly noticed a little trail of oil lamps leading into the forest and you'd missed this every other time? Treasure hunting requires keen observation and every tiny discovery is its own reward (alongside, of course, the loot).

MISKA

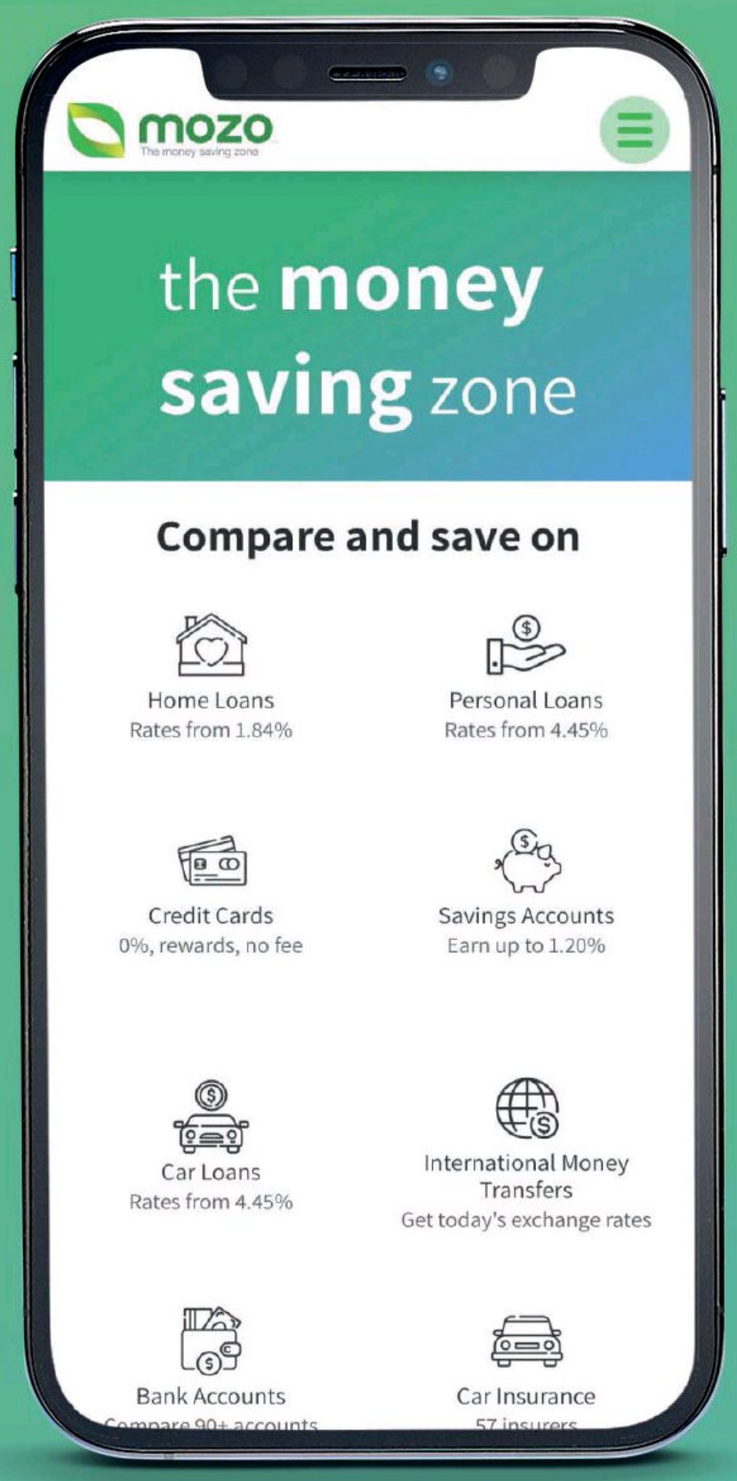
DEVELOPER Umbrella Party Studios **PRICE** TBA **AVAILABILITY** TBA
WEBSITE https://store.steampowered.com/app/1766940/Miska/

Miska is immediately immersive. The sound design references so many creatures, not all of whom I could name; cicadas, maybe a frog. This is a vibrant portrayal of an Australian National Park. Even the rubbish and recycling bins are faithfully familiar. When Melbourne's lockdown ended, the first place I wanted to be was The Otways, for a picnic and a walk. The peacefulness of this experience is something that I'm surprised a game can represent so well. I noticed what I think is a (red) Flowering Gum and Camouflage Trees. I wanted to stay a while.

Almost overshadowed by the surrounding beauty, I noticed that other picnickers had been careless. There was rubbish everywhere. Designers, Victoria Gyors and Alan Robinson, say, "In order to trigger memories from your past, you must first clean up the environment so that the area is more closely aligned to what it once was." After regeneration, you can match the scene to an old polaroid. You've clearly been here before. One sister comments about the purchase of the nearby caravan and says that they're ready for adventure.

Although Miska is early in development, I enjoyed pausing to relax on a bench, which triggered musical stings. There's a journal which might eventually be used for collectibles, with categories like flowers and insects. I found a fossil. Clearing all of the rubbish was very satisfying, especially because I knew that the memories relied on the area being pristine again. Over time, animals might even return. The greatest reward was then being able to sit on a bench and appreciate this environment the way it was meant to be.

Miska is previewed by Meghann's assistant, MAE UDARBE, because she is interested in how games can tell stories about the natural environment.



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ELDEN RING

The bell tolls for thee

Stumbling out of our own grave, we find brief respite at a glowing Site Of Grace. Nearby, a man in a mask rebuffs us in a posh English accent for being "maidenless", wryly suggesting we "feel free to go off and die in a ditch somewhere". On a nearby hill a huge knight in armour patrols on a horse. As we approach it, a large health bar fills the screen. It is the Tree Sentinel. Enormous lance in hand, he knocks over small trees as he swipes at us, sending us flying into (of course) a ditch.

You died.

This is, after all, a soulslike. For in as many ways as Elden Ring represents brave new ground for FromSoftware, it's also a continuation of all the elements we've loved in the studio's previous work (Demon's Souls, Dark Souls, Bloodborne, and Sekiro). Elden Ring feels like a culmination of From's work in many ways, bringing forward systems from its past works and adding new twists.

The biggest difference is in the world design. Stepping out of the Fringefolk Hero's Grave to The First Step, we look out over Limgrave, just one region of the Lands Between, and feel almost dizzy with possibility. The Dark Souls games have some great vistas, but you can quickly pick out one of a handful of pathways through them. Here the routes are our own to make, landmarks like ruins and swamps teasing us to worm our way over to them and explore, and foreboding structures like Stormveil Castle and the Erdtree constant reminders of our quest for the Elden Ring, and to dethrone the lords (who are lurking in more structured soulslike dungeons called Legacies).

WELL TRAVELLED

We easily spend over ten hours exploring the slice of Limgrave open to us in our hands-on. Partly that's because we don't want to leave any stone unturned, barrel unrolled into, or class unplayed, but mainly it's because of how dense the environment is. Yes, Elden Ring does have an open world, but not in the style of something like Assassin's Creed Valhalla. It's smaller (though still large), and packed with things to find around every corner. It's closer to the 'wide linear' of Uncharted: The Lost Legacy, where every corner of the world feels like it has a purpose.

That said, how you approach exploring that width in the Lands Between is very much up to you. There's a reason the powerful Tree Sentinel patrols the route between our safe haven and the obvious crumbling ruins of a church – it's to encourage us to find a way around.

Moving off the beaten path, we slice through some creepy bat-like creatures and then become distracted by a set of ruins, illuminated by a flickering bonfire »

"EVERY CORNER OF THE OPEN WORLD FEELS LIKE IT HAS A PURPOSE."

"Do you have any idea how long it takes to get ketchup stains out of stone?"

Elden Ring

1 Status ailments can be deadly. But eat a lesser poison, and you can build up some immunity to these mysterious moving plants. 2 A giant and masses of soldiers. Good thing you have a steed to whisk you away. 3 Could this Grace be at the ancient Roundtable Hold? Exactly what happened to the knights who served there?

» and patrolled by a host of guards. As we approach, the sky darkens and rain begins to fall in thick sheets. Crouching, we hide in the bushes that pepper the landscape. When we find an opening, we backstab our way through the ranks. It lacks the precision of Sekiro's assassinations, but then we're no ninja. Before long we bungle it, a guard spots us and toots on a big trumpet, and they all come running. Including a rather big knight who promptly stomps us into oblivion.

GOOD GRACE

All is not quite lost, however. Despite the generous placement of Graces, which act like Dark Souls' bonfires, there's another checkpoint system in Elden Ring – Stakes Of Marika.

Essentially, these are temporary checkpoints that are active when you're nearby.

While you'll still need to run back to collect your dropped upgrade currency (here called runes) if you die, it enables FromSoftware to be much more generous, allowing you to revive right on the edge of a difficult area to have another go immediately, with no need to traipse a great distance. It's perfectly suited for bigger spaces in the Lands Between. A similar mechanic smooths out the multiplayer. Summoning Pools scattered throughout areas are where, by default, summon signs are collected, creating spots where you know you can more easily find assistance (though signs can still be left in chosen locations too).

Similarly, glittering teardrop scarabs litter the world. Along with enemy groups, these can restore flasks when struck down, meaning you can keep exploring for longer. In some cases they reward you with Artes Of War. These special drops are weapon skills that can be grafted onto certain weapons at Graces. They can also be found hidden around the world in chests, are dropped from tucked away mini-bosses, or are earned when you make offerings at covenant-like places of worship. Sometimes getting at them takes a bit of head-scratching – like an invisible scarab we found on a beach, whose path we had to predict in order to get the drop on the speedy fella.

FINGER FOOD

Thanks to these systems, a second attempt at clearing the camp in the ruins goes much better, and we vanquish the big knight. Camping at the Lost Grace near an imposing arch that leads to the even more dominating Stormveil Castle, we're visited by a spirit named Melina, who offers to act as our "fingermaiden" in exchange for passage to the Erdtree. Like Demon's Souls' Maiden In Black, she's the one who takes your runes and bestows stat boosts upon you in return.

She also gives us Torrent, the spectral steed we all saw when the game was originally announced. Torrent is a joy to control, and very responsive. Rather than having the clunkiness of a horse, Torrent empowers you to explore (and has a double jump to aid with that).

With Torrent now plodding at our side, we turn away from the path to the castle and begin to fully explore the areas around us. As night falls, we joust with a dark knight cloaked in black robes and riding a giant horse, who disappears with the sun, rob a convoy of craggy giants to gain some useful new armour, and discover a ruined village full of unique poison flower enemies protecting one huge one that summons powerful beams of light from the sky.

From there we cut through strange vampire-like demi-humans armed with clubs and shoddy shields, and ride through a swamp through to a crevice filled with skeletons who continuously revive themselves. Subsequently we're jumped by a black phantom, who a wandering "finger hunter" NPC helps us vanquish, and then we enter a mini-dungeon, the Murkwater Catacombs.

GRAVE OMENS

Filled with enemies ready to ambush us from around corners, and traps aplenty, the Catacombs feels like a bite-sized Dark Souls level. The mini-boss at the end, the Grave Warden, is a tough opponent (but susceptible to backstabs as we roll around him with perfect timing). A bulky man with huge chain flails, he might not be the most spectacular boss FromSoftware has made, but he presents an interesting challenge. A few more of these small dungeons are scattered around Limgrave, including one that serves as a

1 Either that's a very big skeleton, or we're seeing this from the perspective of a mouse. 2 Summoning spirits to your side can provide a perfect distraction, allowing you to get some good hits in. 3 Explosive barrels and enemies about to throw flames at you? Stormveil, a Legacy, is a Souls level all right. 4 Dragons might be big and dangerous, but even they don't like to get poked in the eye.

» tunnel beneath the sea to an extra area housing a mysterious place of dragon worship.

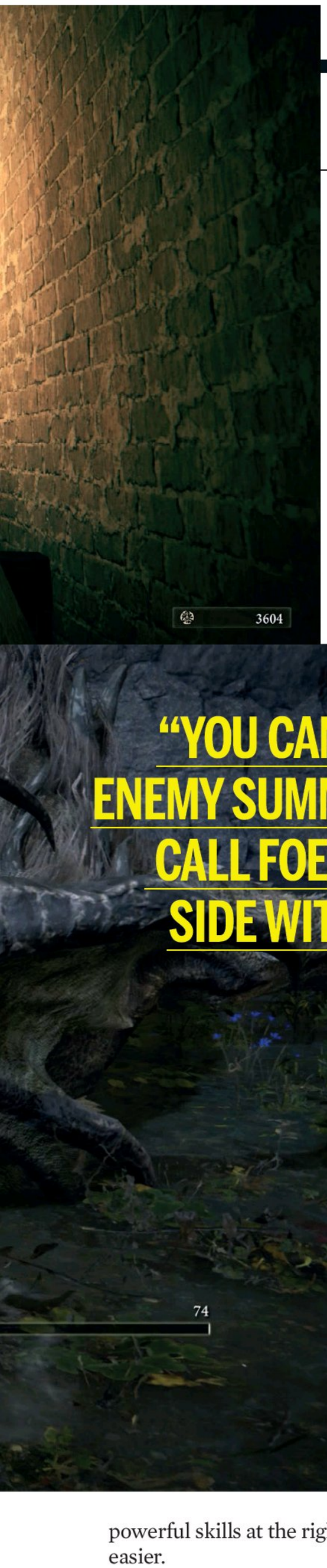
Speaking of dragons, in the middle of the nearby swamp we trigger the descent of one. It's a massive creature, and one we can only really think of tackling on horseback as it stomps and flames all around the large open area. On Torrent you can trigger a burst of speed, which comes in handy for dodging out of the way of a stream of flames. (The same keystroke initiates the dodge roll on foot.) If anything, Torrent is almost a little too useful, with most encounters out in the open world feeling much easier as you swipe down from out of reach, though it's offset by the huge stun that comes if Torrent's dispelled from beneath you, leaving you open to massive damage if you're not careful.

NEW LEGACY

Eventually, we decide to head for Stormveil Castle, and the boss fight that awaits before we're even able to enter. Margit The Fallen, a large lad with a big stick and plenty of ethereal weapons, will put those used to Dark Souls to the test, but can be more easily bested with canny use of Elden Ring's new combat mechanics.

Margit hits hard and moves fast, but can be stance broken. Guard counters allow you to hit back immediately after blocking, damaging an enemy's stance (not indicated by any meter as it was in Sekiro). You're still vulnerable while doing it, so need to await an opening, but it's almost like a more forgiving parry (which itself is a shield weapon skill, so may not always be in your kit). Similarly, you can charge up a heavy attack, or jump and heavy attack to also chip away at stance. Break it, and they'll be wide open to serious damage.

Weapon skills can also give you an edge, using Focus Points (FP) to dish out special moves that can be quite powerful (and sometimes require some windup). Distractions to create openings don't have to come from other players, though. You can collect enemy summons and call foes to your side with a bell at an FP cost. Call down a pack of three spirit wolves, and getting off a couple of



"YOU CAN COLLECT ENEMY SUMMONS AND CALL FOES TO YOUR SIDE WITH A BELL."

powerful skills at the right time can be a lot easier.

With Margit felled, we get only a small taste of Stormveil, one of the Legacies scattered throughout Elden Ring's six main regions. This is a soulslike as you know it, a dungeon with weaving passageways filled with tough enemies. From the taste we get, the castle promises to be quite expansive.

Elden Ring is genuinely awe-inspiring in its scope, as well as being one of the most beautiful-looking games in FromSoft's repertoire. With a February release on the horizon, Game Of The Year contenders will have some strong competition from early in 2022.

A GENUINELY OPEN WORLD

Open world games are a dime-a-dozen in 2022. It's actually rare for a big budget action game to come in any other format, making rare anomalies like The Last of Us 2 and Doom Eternal very welcome treats indeed. Once a promise of freedom, the open world has become stale.

For all the merits of, say, Assassin's Creed or Far Cry (noticing a pattern here?) their open worlds feel like nothing more than set dressing. Beyond the ocassional impulse to enter photo mode, a typical modern open world game doesn't offer much more than just a huge expanse of traversable space, dotted with dozens of activities that are all pretty much identical. There's a place for that style of game, but does every open world game need to feel the same way? Elden Ring thinks not, and would like a word, thanks.

The shift away from the Metroidvania-style level design of the Dark Souls games is a genuine cause for concern, but a couple of hours with Elden Ring immediately dismissed any misgivings I had about the format change. Not only that, but From Software has managed to do something that very few open world games have ever done: the studio has filled the map with so many unique encounters, so many tantalising reasons to explore, and such a dearth of identikit content-bucket style 'missions', that the Lands Between feels like a genuinely fascinating, eerie, and dangerous place to be. The recent Public Network Test offered up a fraction of the map, but I feel like I barely scratched the surface of what it has to offer after four hours of play across two sessions.

Dark Souls changed the modern RPG indelibly. With any luck, Elden Ring will change the modern open world with the same emphasis. This is genuine worldbuilding, not just a land full of waypoints and useless collectibles.

"THE SHIFT AWAY FROM THE METROIDVANIA-STYLE LEVEL DESIGN OF THE DARK SOULS GAMES IS A GENUINE CAUSE FOR CONCERN"

Men of War II

Just taking a break to admire the planes.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
2022	Best Way	1C Entertainment	1cpublishing.eu

MEN OF WAR II

The return of the men who love war, and their tanks

Videogames are pretty invested in continuing and replaying World War II. There was a period where it seemed like people were getting a bit tired of the old confrontation between Allies and Axis, but it was short lived. Hot on the heels of *Company of Heroes*' reappearance and *Call of Duty* heading back to its favourite war, we've also got returning RTS *Men of War II*. It's a good time to be a lover of old tanks.

These tanks were very much the stars of the first hands-off demo and presentation from publisher 1C Entertainment and *Men of War*'s original developer, Best Way, once again at the helm. In the clips of campaign missions and PvP confrontations, I almost felt bad for the wee digital soldiers getting mown down by these indomitable vehicles.

FIRST LOOK

HEAVY METAL

Men of War II's tanks seem unstoppable, with the heavier ones able to do a huge amount of damage even on their lonesome. They aren't really unstoppable, of course. Some well-positioned anti-tank guns, or sneaky infantry keeping out of sight, can take these monsters out. Whether you're commanding or fighting them, you'll want to pay attention to things like armour thickness and the piercing power of shells. Thankfully, all this stuff is displayed clearly, helping you get a read on the damage you're doing and taking.

Modular damage means there's more than just two states. Vehicles can be immobilised, turrets can be taken out, gunners can be killed – there are plenty of ways to slow down an enemy's advance, leaving them vulnerable.

With the series' Direct Control feature, you get to effectively sit inside the tank, controlling it like you might a first-person shooter. All vehicles and troops can be commanded this way, though some will be third-person. Some tanks can be camouflaged, too, and in one clip I saw a Tiger disguised as a bush devastating a convoy before it could even figure out where the attack was coming from.

Of course, all of *Men of War II*'s units require an on-the-ball commander to take advantage of their tricks. It looks like there will be a fair amount of micromanagement as you select different types of ammunition to deal with different kinds of enemies, and you'll need to make sure they're fully stocked back in your territory.

LINE OF FIRE

Speaking of territory, *Men of War 2* has a dynamic front line that divides maps into enemy and ally areas, limiting what you can do. Troops can only appear a certain distance from the front line; engineers have to be in your own territory to erect defences; vehicles have to retreat into your territory to resupply; and enemy territory will be hidden by a fog of war, unlike your own.

Alongside the twin campaigns are co-op and PvP modes. In co-op, you can play specific missions or entire campaigns in a five-person team, while the PvP mode will be a 5v5 affair with players picking a preset battalion from a list of 45 – 15 each for the Allied, Axis, and Soviet forces. Each battalion has a specific playstyle, with units that represent the different phases of battle. In the case of tanks, that means you'll have light tanks to start with, and then you'll want to bring in things like the King Tiger when you reach the endgame.

If you need a break from World War II, then modders might have your back. With full mod support and a toolset provided by Best Way, modders will be able to make sci-fi scenarios, or ones that go further back in history. Amid *Men of War: Assault Squad 2*'s mods, for instance, are *Fallout* and *Warhammer* adaptations, so we should be able to expect the same kind of thing after *Men of War 2* arrives in 2022.

Fraser Brown

IN ONE CLIP I SAW A TIGER DISGUISED AS A BUSH DEVASTATING A CONVOY

The close-up detail is incredibly impressive.

FAR LEFT: Some pals hunting nature's most elusive beast: tanks.

LEFT: Pretty sure that convoy won't be around for much longer.

ZONE IN THE

New mutants, a new faction, and new ways to die in **STALKER 2: HEART OF CHERNOBYL**.

By Chris Livingston

The Zone of the *STALKER* series is filled with radiation and dread in equal measures. Home to mutant horrors, hostile factions, and otherworldly anomalies, the Zone only promises one thing: a quick and brutal death. The original *STALKER* games were bleak, terrifying, unforgiving survival sandboxes. The Zone is the most miserable place in videogame history. We can't wait to go back.

We have, however, waited for *quite* a while. It's been over a decade since the release of the last *STALKER* game by GSC Gameworld, *Call of Pripyat*, and *STALKER 2* (oddly enough, it's the fourth game in the series) was originally planned for 2012. It was cancelled that same year, only to reappear in development again in 2018, this time in the Unreal Engine. Aiming for a release in April of 2022, we're finally getting tantalisingly close to another visit to the Zone. And the wait may have been worth it, as it sounds like something closer to the vision GSC Gameworld had for its first *STALKER* game, Shadow of Chernobyl, way back in 2007.

"The *STALKER* series always aimed to be set in a seamless open world, but only now is it possible to implement it as planned," says game director Evgeniy Grygorovych. "*STALKER 2* features a vast world to explore with different biomes, numerous locations, labs, and undergrounds to explore. It's 64 square kilometres, and it's all yours. You can go anywhere."

DEATH AND REBIRTH

Time hasn't just passed for us while we waited for the next *STALKER* game. Time has passed in the Zone, too. Years have gone by since the events of *STALKER: Call of Pripyat*, and that passage of time is evident in the look of *STALKER 2*.

"In terms of art direction and general feel, that means more modern vibes have been added to the atmosphere of decay and devastation," says Grygorovych. "At the same time, locations and environments have become even more obsolete and abandoned, as a significant time has passed in this frozen world. This is why the contrast between technology and abandonment feels even stronger."

That's also why you might be skulking cautiously through the world and suddenly stumble upon a field covered in bright red poppy plants, which provides a shocking burst of colour in the normally grey and gloomy Zone. Green grass, leafy trees, and ruined buildings covered in moss show nature flourishing in some areas, despite all the deadly radiation and decay. At the same time, other locations have plunged further into ruin. As seen in the trailer, a guard tower from the second game in the trilogy, *STALKER: Clear Sky*, can be visited in *STALKER 2*, but the tower is now barely standing, leaning crookedly and held up by

cables as if it's about to crumble into a pile of twisted and rusty metal.

But flourishing flora and decaying buildings aren't the only thing that's changed over the years. The Zone is home to new inhabitants, both human and otherwise.

OH, DEER

You can expect to meet many of the Zone's familiar residents in *STALKER 2*. As we saw in the E3 trailer, the fast-moving, nearly silent, often invisible Bloodsuckers are back (unfortunately, because they're scary as hell) and you can expect to run into the hooded, dwarf-like Burers again, too, still ready to yank weapons out of your hands and unleash deadly shockwaves with their telekinetic powers. But *STALKER 2* will also feature new mutants and monsters, and even something that initially sounds harmless may wind up being a very grave threat.

Typically in open world survival games, deer are a combination of a bit of pleasant scenery (aw, a deer!) and a resource (yum, a deer!). In most games these gentle creatures are to be admired at a distance or hunted for meat, leather, and other crafting resources. Even in a radioactive wasteland, you wouldn't expect a deer, even an irradiated, mutated deer, to be anything more than a harmless feast.

But this is the world of *STALKER* we're talking about. Mutant deer in *STALKER 2* are nothing to sneeze at. In fact, it sounds like you might want to avoid them altogether. First, the deer look absolutely badass, with glowing eyes set below a massive cluster of jagged antlers. If you were thinking of walking away from your hunting excursion with a cosy warm deer fur pelt, you can probably forget it: most of the deer's fur has fallen out, leaving only a few tufts growing between hard armoured plating of what might be mutated bone that's protruding through the animal's hide. This deer looks mean and not even remotely tasty, and its armoured frame means a simple shot isn't going to take it down – you'll need to find a weak spot somewhere on its body if you want to kill it. And it's not just going to be standing there gently nibbling grass while you shoot: the deer can attack with its sharp hooves – both back and front – and that chaotic crown of jagged horns.

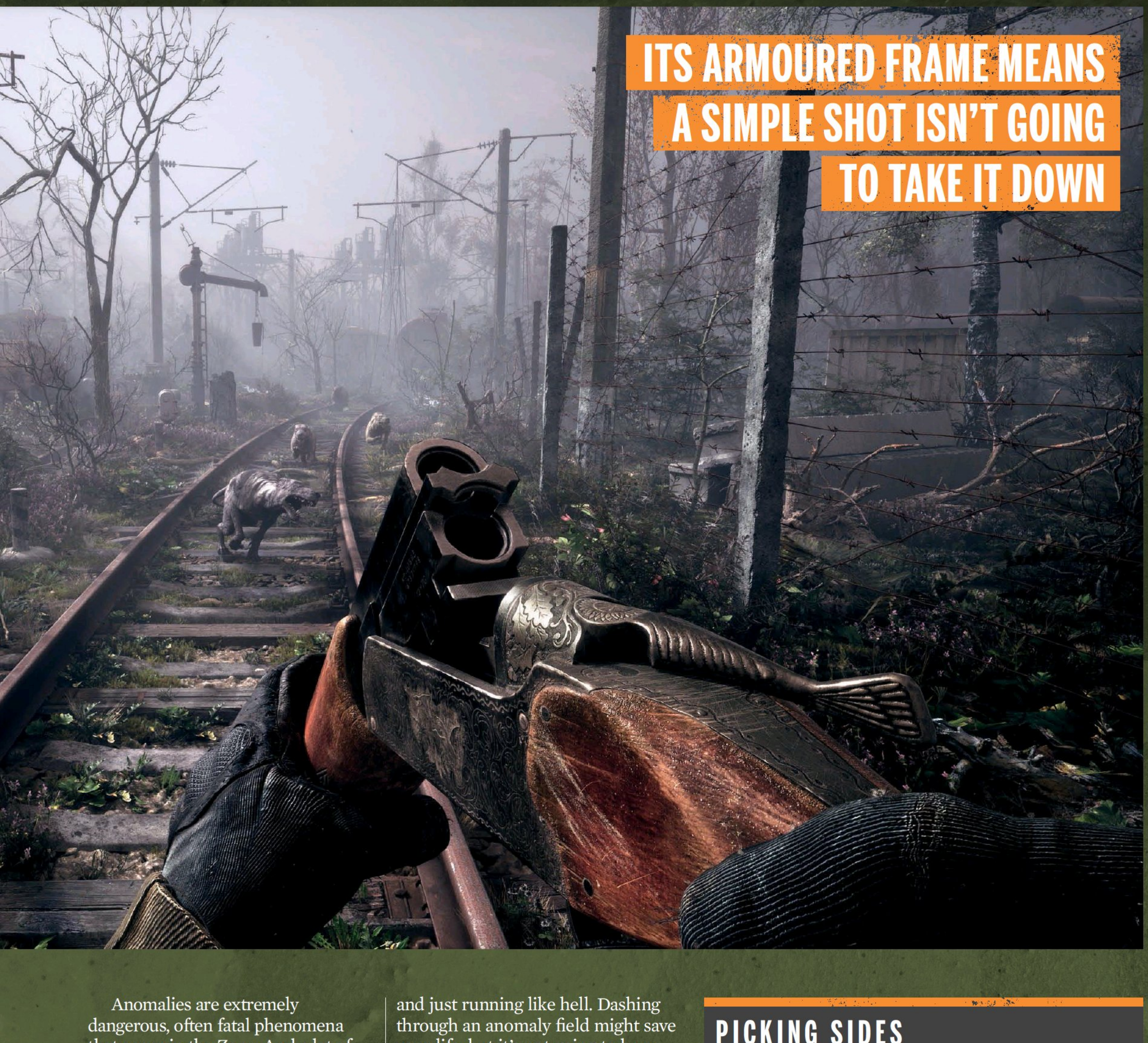
But that's only part of the problem. *STALKER 2*'s deer hasn't just mutated physically, but mentally. Yes, this is a *psychic* deer, and not only can it launch physical and psy-attacks at you, it can summon other medium-sized mutants nearby for help, meaning targeting a single deer can lead to a swarm of other nasty creatures. Don't worry, it gets even worse. The single deer you were foolhardy enough to shoot at now appears to be many deer, because this irradiated deer can create illusory copies of itself. Now not only are you fighting a potential mob of helper mutants, you're also trying to figure out which of the several deer you're looking at is the real one and which are simply illusions. Like I said, you might want to avoid the deer of *STALKER 2* altogether.

ABOVE: Irradiated dogs hunt in packs, so make sure you're locked and loaded.

ANOMALOUS MATERIALS

Of course, the whole reason you're going into the Zone and braving encounters with psychic armoured deer in the first place is to hunt for artefacts. Artefacts are rare, valuable, and often dangerous items that have gained unusual properties due to the anomalies of the Zone. If you've been in the Zone before, you're no stranger to anomalies, but familiarity might not help as much as you think.

"Anomalies work in much the same way as before, but have become more dangerous and more varied," says Grygorovych.



ITS ARMOURED FRAME MEANS A SIMPLE SHOT ISN'T GOING TO TAKE IT DOWN

Anomalies are extremely dangerous, often fatal phenomena that occur in the Zone. And a lot of times they occur before you're even aware you've stepped into one. They come in many different forms: sometimes they're explosive, fiery events that will flash-fry you where you stand, or gravitational vortexes that will pick you up and spin you around as if you've been caught in a tornado. There can be singular anomalies, they can be clustered together in anomaly fields, and there are new 'arch anomalies', such as the Fire Whirlwind, which represent an even deadlier type of threat.

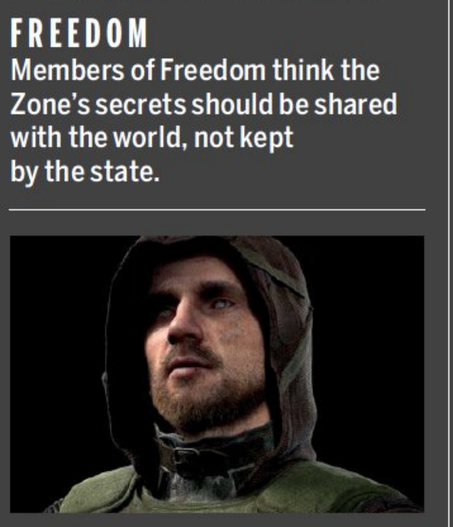
Special detectors can help you spot the anomalies and point you to the precious artefacts within them, but they're no guarantee you'll escape in one piece or with the item you were searching for. And some tricks for dealing with anomalies from the previous *STALKER* games might not be viable strategies, such as one we probably all did at one time or another – suddenly realising an anomaly is about to go critical and just running like hell. Dashing through an anomaly field might save your life, but it's not going to be a long-term solution. Even if you survive, your equipment may be heavily damaged or even destroyed. As Grygorovych bluntly puts it, "Your armour will turn to dust" after a few sprints through an anomaly field. With good quality equipment so hard to come by in the game, it'll cost you dearly if you try to take a shortcut through an anomaly field too many times.

As for the arch anomalies like the Fire Whirlwind, GSC isn't telling us much about them yet, other than that simply making your way through them using detectors won't be enough to come away with your prize. "The temperature is too high and the artefact from the centre cannot be retrieved," says Grygorovych of the Fire Whirlwind. "We don't want to spoil the solution, but there is a way to fetch the artefact." I'm guessing it involves something more durable than some sort of fancy oven mitt.

PICKING SIDES

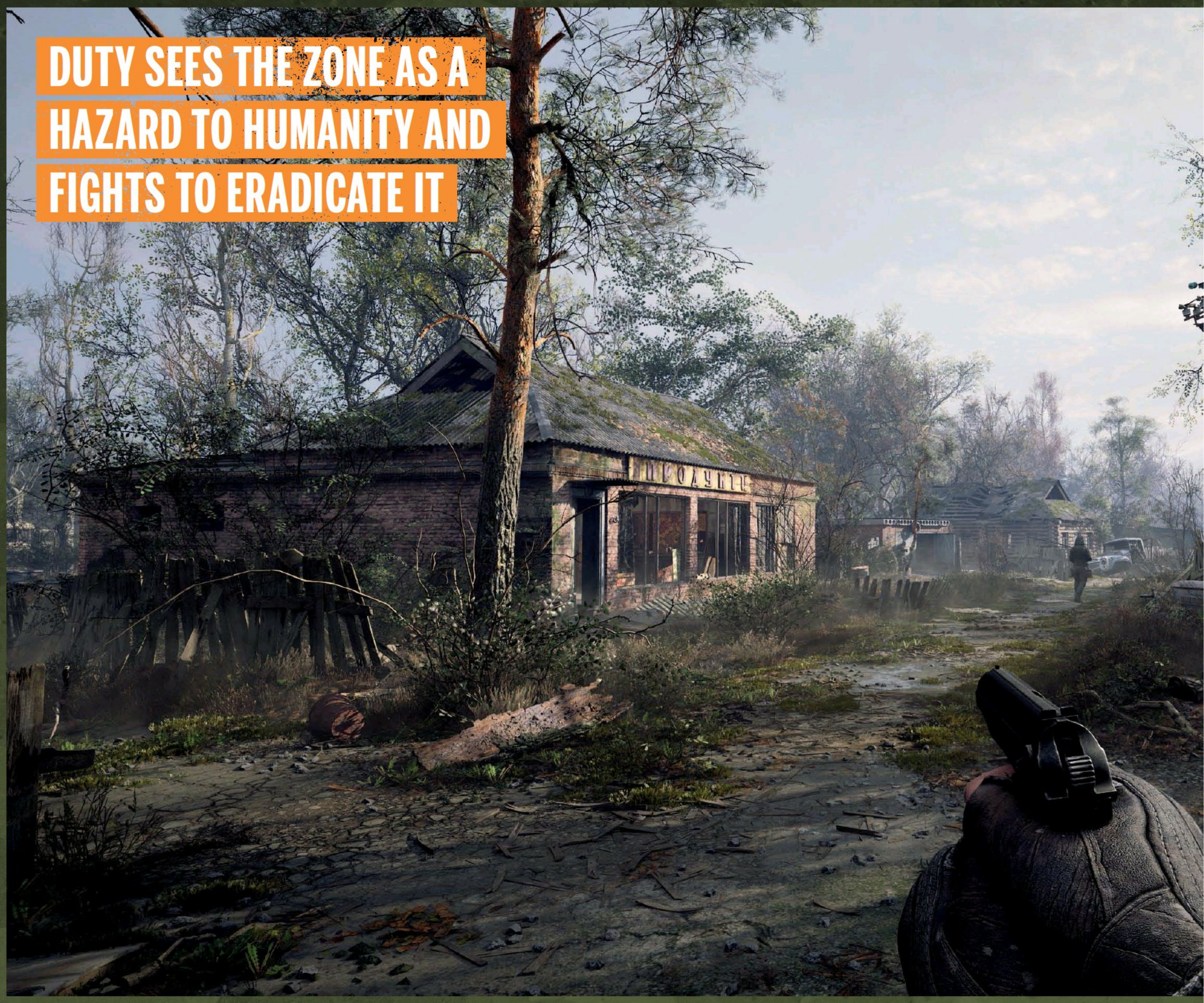
STALKER's factions have different goals and ideologies. Who will you side with?

FREEDOM
Members of Freedom think the Zone's secrets should be shared with the world, not kept by the state.



MONOLITH
The religious cult of Monolith are back, determined to kill anyone trying to reach the centre of the Zone.

WARD
Led by Colonel Korshunov, this new faction acts like the policemen of the Zone. Bandits hate them. Will you?



IT'S THE FUZZ!

Along with new mutants, a powerful and feared new faction has risen in the years you've been away from the Zone. This new faction was hinted at in the E3 trailer, as eagle-eyed viewers spotted graffiti on a wall written in Ukrainian, which included the word 'guard'.

This new faction is called the Ward. Put it this way: if the Zone is the Wild West and bandits are outlaws and bank robbers, the Ward are the lawmen. They may not have tin stars pinned to their chests, but they're definitely seen as police by the rest of the Zone.

The leader of the Ward is Colonel Alexander Korshunov, an accomplished and experienced soldier who personally recruited the faction's members from groups of highly trained mercenaries and turned them into a proper army. A disciplined leader, he doesn't tolerate disloyalty from his soldiers, and crossing him is a bad idea.

The Ward sounds a bit similar to Duty, another paramilitary faction from earlier *STALKER* games, but Duty sees the Zone as a hazard to humanity and fights to eradicate it. The Ward, on the other hand, wants to control the dangers of the Zone so they may serve humankind through the scientific knowledge gained from them. As a result, the Ward's goal is to protect the important discoveries taking place at the Scientific Institute for Research of the Chernobyl Anomalous Area. They don't look kindly on bandits, and the feeling is mutual.

Choosing to side with Colonel Korshunov and the Ward, or the leader and members of any of *STALKER 2*'s factions, will be an important and difficult choice for players, according to Grygorovych. "Several characters of conflicting ideologies can be found even within

ABOVE: Even in the deadly Zone there are a few safe places to visit.

CLUB DREAD

Love STALKER's bleak and hopeless atmosphere? Sure, we all do! Here are other games that capture a similar feeling

METRO 2033
It's linear, not open world, but *Metro 2033* captures the same dread and horror as the *STALKER* series.

SURVARIUM
Deadly anomalies and FPS combat in a postapocalyptic landscape. Like *STALKER*, but multiplayer only.

ESCAPE FROM TARKOV
Brutal combat and survival elements fill this shooter as players try to escape with valuable loot.

CHERNOBYLITE
Hell, it's a non-linear survival shooter that takes place in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone and features Stalkers.

the same faction," he says. "Even within the [GSC Gameworld], I see people argue about the choices [their coworkers] have made."

SURVIVAL KIT

As always, survival is a challenge and that's not just due to monsters, mutants, and roaming bandits. While most of *STALKER 2*'s survival systems will sound familiar, such as using bandages to stop bleeding, meds to recover lost health, and different types of protective clothing or armour to avoid lethal doses of radiation, there are a few new survival elements sprinkled in that will make keeping yourself alive even more difficult, even when you're not being shot at, blown up, or stalked by psychic deer.

As always, you'll need to keep yourself well-fed, but going without eating for too long will do more than simply lower your hit points. There will be secondary effects of hunger, which include more difficulty aiming your weapons and a loss of stamina. Your stomach may even begin to audibly rumble if you've skipped too many meals. With a full belly, on the other hand, you'll be able to move faster and cover long distances more quickly.

And sleep will play a big role in maintaining your health and effectiveness in the Zone. If a STALKER goes more than a full day without sleep, they'll begin to feel the effects of that fatigue, and the longer they continue pushing themselves without rest the more severe those effects will become. The STALKER's vision will be affected, they'll lose stamina, and they may even begin experiencing auditory hallucinations. There are already plenty of creepy, disturbing and horrifying sounds in the Zone: you definitely don't want to be adding to them by not getting enough sack time.

There are, naturally, short-term solutions for dealing with the negative effects of hunger or lack of sleep. "Any debuff can be overcome with an item for a short time period," says Grygorovych. "For example, the negative effects from the [sleep-deprived] condition can be temporarily removed by having an energy drink. But if you do not satisfy the needs of your character, the sum of all those needs significantly complicates the gameplay." You can put off things like rest and meals for a while, in other words – and seeing as how the Zone isn't a great place to take a nap, you'll probably have to. But it'll all catch up with you eventually.

FRIENDZONED

Grygorovych expects players to be able to spend 100 hours to see everything *STALKER 2* has to offer, which includes an intricate plot and non-linear storyline. And with different choices to make, such as which faction to side with, he says it's "impossible" to see everything in a single playthrough. "We have 30 narrative designers working specifically on plot and quests,"says Grygorovych . "Creating a non-linear story is the most difficult challenge in games and we consider the plot to be one of the main features of the game. We are really proud of how it's shaping up."

There will also be multiplayer elements like PvP, deathmatch, and team deathmatch added after launch. If you were hoping to take on the Zone with a friend at your side, however, that's not in the cards. When it comes to *STALKER 2*, co-op is a non-starter. "It is impossible to add a co-op mode without ruining the experience of overcoming the difficulties on your own," Grygorovych says. When it comes to surviving the Zone, you'll have to do it solo, STALKER. ■

The underground of Agroprom is the last place you want to run into someone. Or something.

Weird West

ABOVE: You'll choose between five characters whose stories intertwine.

RIGHT: Enemies carry a range of loot that'll help you on your mission.

FAR RIGHT: You can find and hire crewmates to help you in battles.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
Now	WolfEye Studios	Devolver Digital	weirdwest.com

WEIRD WEST

An immersive sim that blends chaotic combat and horror

One grisly stop on a trek through the first of five chapters in *Weird West* will remind you of what was so scarce in its most recent contemporary, *Deathloop*. Both are immersive sims with vastly different goals. *Deathloop* was about harnessing an unwieldy system, but *Weird West* is about *living* in it.

Early in *Weird West*, I came across a coven ritual. The witches asked me to leave them alone, but before I could walk away, their ritual succeeded. A horde of undead and their ghastly leader poured out of the summoning circle. The sisters were armed for it. They took care of the abominations like it was a Monday. I just watched.

This event, like some others I experienced in a preview version of *Weird West*'s first act, unfolded without any input from me. This year's big immersive sim, *Deathloop*, also features inhabitants who go about their days without you, but little consequence happens without your intervention. You rarely get to stand back and watch everything play out.

IMMERSIVE GRIM

Raphaël Colantonio, *Weird West*'s creative director, previously led Arkane's admirable effort to keep the immersive sim genre alive with *Dishonored* and *Prey*. In 2017, Colantonio left the studio he founded, and in 2019 he formed a new studio called WolfEye. Arkane went on to release *Deathloop*, a modernised take on the genre, whereas WolfEye's *Weird West* travels back in time and plucks from classic RPGs like *Fallout*.

Like *Deathloop*, *Weird West* is about finding your own way through environments designed first and foremost to obey physical laws: bullets ignite barrels, heavy rain puts out fires, and the elements at your disposal are often at the enemies' as well. Like *Deathloop*'s island, the setting is a playground for the absurd, a smear of the American West with devils in the seams. Beyond that, the two games diverge significantly.

As I led my veteran bounty hunter through *Weird West*'s tangled world via a bird's-eye perspective, I spent a lot of time speaking with the people, something that happens rarely in *Deathloop*. It's also the first game I've played set in this time period that features a number of Black and Asian characters, although it's unclear to me at this point if *Weird West* plans to grapple with America's westward expansion from those perspectives or the native perspective, which are often erased in western fiction, or if the supernatural will take centre stage.

PLAYED IT

The first character, a bounty hunter in search of her husband, is equipped with a series of lethal and silent skills but is very weak. Enemies carrying shotguns wiped me out in a few hits. I was forced to take cover, roll and carefully aim, but every bullet felt like a dice roll. Stealth is an option too, but the density of enemy patrols made it hard for me to stay undetected. And when the caves coughed up monsters, the sturdy crates I was hiding behind couldn't save me.

That's why *Weird West* works, at least in the early hours I previewed. Despite having considerable influence over the scenarios you can find yourself in, the world is against you. To make it through, you'll need a bit of luck. While not as clever as *Deathloop*'s time loop premise, it means there's almost no repetition robbing it of spontaneity.

Weird West reassured me that the immersive sim is still playful, still sharp, and open for interpretation by developers who want to push it further. If what I played is close to what the final game will be in early 2022, I'll be thrilled to step into its clockwork world and make some spectacular mistakes.

Tyler Colp

I WAS FORCED TO TAKE COVER, ROLL AND AIM, BUT EVERY BULLET FELT LIKE A DICE ROLL

THE BIG 20

WORDS BY

Fraser Brown
Robin Valentine
Luke Kemp
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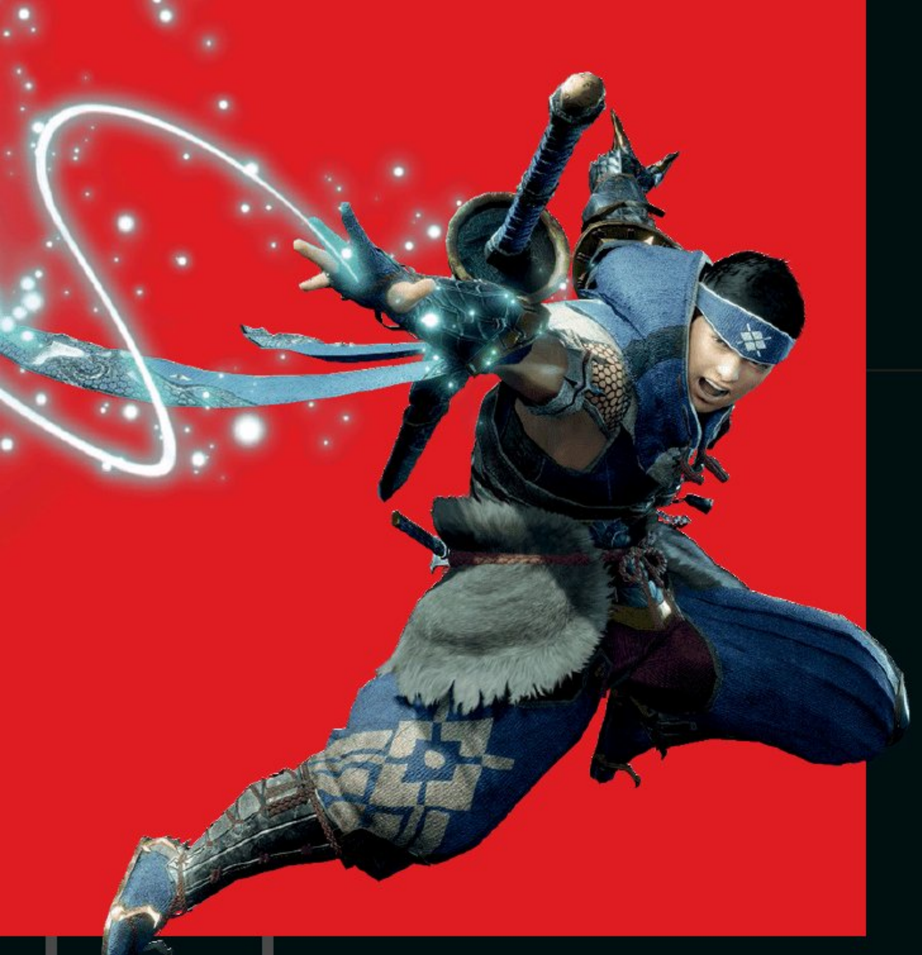


There's a packed year for PC gaming ahead of us

22

PREVIEW

COMPANY OF HEROES 3

RELEASE 2022 | **DEV** Relic Entertainment | **PUB** Sega | **LINK** community.companyofheroes.com

Heading into *Company of Heroes 3*'s multiplayer pre-alpha, I've got a plan. "I'll start with a comp stomp," I tell Relic, hoping to nab myself an easy victory in an AI skirmish. I spend most of this first match fighting with the AI over a single capture point in a village square that rapidly becomes unrecognisable as the ground is turned into craters.

I'm playing as the USF Airborne battlegroup, one of two currently available for the US faction, and one of four in the build I'm playing. While the singleplayer campaign lets you build your forces out of whatever companies and detachments you want, even creating hybrids with US, UK, and Commonwealth units, the multiplayer battlegroups are preset fighting forces with broad roles that favour different playstyles.

The Airborne battlegroup is, naturally, all about planes, whether they're dropping off paratroopers and guns, or going on bombing and strafing runs. I've already unlocked the paratrooper ability, and this helps me to speed up reinforcements after losing everyone in an earlier scuffle. The plane gets blown to smithereens, the wreckage falling right next to my base, but all the troops make it out in time. Sadly, they get taken out by some armoured vehicles. While I try to recover, my enemy takes more territory, fattens up its economy and starts bringing in tanks. I'm screwed.

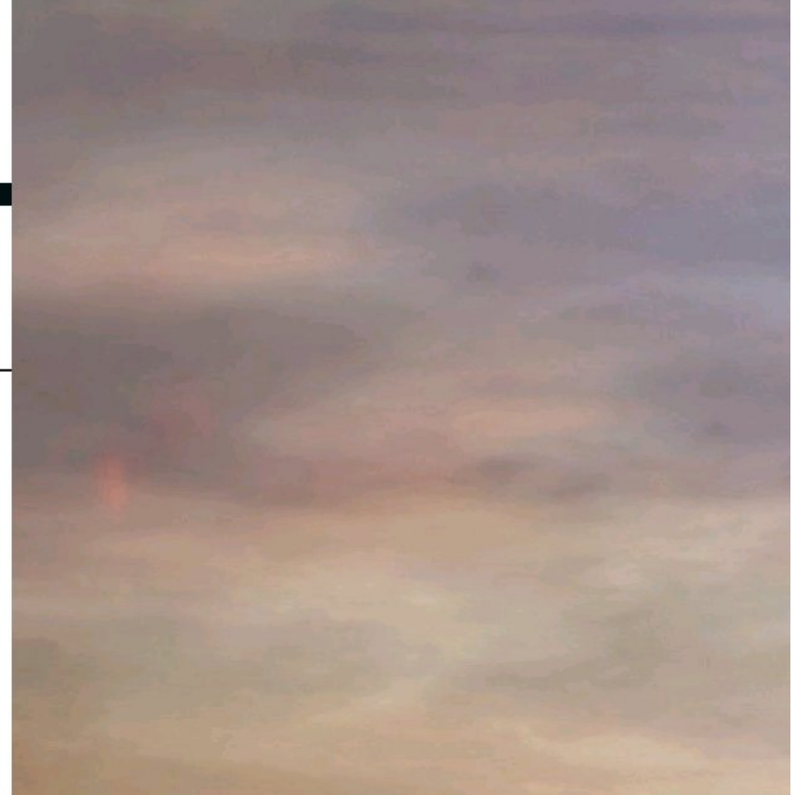
For the second battle, I switch sides and take command of the German Breakthrough battlegroup. It's my turn to scare everyone with some big tanks. I've got a developer helping me out this time, and we're facing another dev and their AI companion. My confidence is bolstered by a strong start, the source of which is an unarmed recon bike that's able to capture territory, unlike most vehicles. With plenty of resources, I'm able to put together a strong force and then get into it in the centre of the map, where we're all fighting over a victory point.

We have the high ground, giving us a handy bonus, and despite the intensity of the fight we manage to hold the enemy back, their bodies and wrecked vehicles littering the bridge below us. Expecting another attack, I heal up via my ally's medical truck, and then secure the area by turning a building into a forward outpost where I'm able to recruit more troops.

TIGER, TIGER...

Keeping troops alive and killing rewards you with veterancy, which works a bit differently in *Company of Heroes 3*, with each faction getting distinct advantages. For the US forces, you get two veterancy specialisation options per unit, but with the Germans it depends on what Field Marshal you select. They get three of them, each conferring unique upgrades, abilities, and veterancy bonuses.

The enemy outsmarts us and manages to get behind us in the north while pushing into our southern territories as well. My veteran infantry units have been wiped out by incendiary strikes, but we've set plenty of Americans on fire as well. I've also unlocked the big guns, finally. The Tiger rolls onto the battlefield, and everyone scatters. A few soldiers get some shots off, but the rockets hit the tank's side armour, and it shrugs it off. The enemy reinforcements dwindle, and a big group of them gets trapped between the Tiger and my ally. It's over, and I've erased the shame of my first battle.



THE INVINCIBLE

An intriguing mystery set on a strange and desolate alien world. The slick retro-futuristic art style is the immediate draw, but the weird, analogue space equipment you'll be using to seek your missing crew also looks super satisfying to mess about with.

RELEASE 2022

SOMERVILLE

This rural, post-apocalyptic adventure comes from one of the original creators of the sublime *Limbo*, and its story of a lost family looks every bit as bleak and affecting as that modern classic. Absolutely sumptuous visuals are the icing on the cake.

RELEASE 2022

2022 PREVIEW

THE ENEMY OUTSMARTS US AND MANAGES TO GET BEHIND US IN THE NORTH WHILE PUSHING INTO OUR SOUTHERN TERRITORIES

LITTLE DEVIL INSIDE

The rural English countryside – circa the Victorian era – plays host to all manner of strange, supernatural creatures in this action-RPG. Light survival elements make each expedition into the wilderness feel like its own perilous journey.

RELEASE 2022

MULTIVERSUS

Warner Bros heroes from Batman, to Jake the Dog, to Arya Stark battle in this *Smash Bros*-alike. Supposedly inspired by the 'Ultra Instinct Shaggy' meme, it's certainly fully embraced it, with a superpowered take on the Scooby Doo character. Games are weird.

RELEASE 2022

RAINBOW SIX EXTRACTION

RELEASE Jan 2022 | **DEV** Ubisoft Montreal | **PUB** Ubisoft | **LINK** ubisoft.com/en-gb/game/rainbow-six/extraction

At last, opposing Rainbow Six factions have stopped trying to shoot one another in the face, and all it took was an alien invasion. *Extraction* is a strictly PvE experience – Operators have been lifted out of *Siege*, given a little tweak here and there, and dropped into this 1-3 player alien hunting simulator. By offering a mixture of offensive (such as Hibana and Sledge) and defensive (including Vigil and Pulse) characters, Extraction allows for a balanced team.

With 13 mission types and 12 'containment zones', there'll be plenty to do, and it'll rarely be as simple as spraying bullets all over the place. In fact, going loud will tend to bring a horde down on you, which will make objectives such as collecting samples much harder. Different enemy types have abilities such as invisibility, laying traps, and smashing through walls; there'll still be plenty of opportunities to put those guns (and gadgets, such as Smoke's gas grenades and Gridlock's TRAX stingers) to use.

DIFFERENT ENEMY TYPES HAVE ABILITIES SUCH AS INVISIBILITY, LAYING TRAPS, AND SMASHING THROUGH WALLS

LEGO STAR WARS: THE SKYWALKER SAGA

First announced in a time far, far away, you'll be able to complete the nine main series Star Wars movie adaptations included in any order you wish. Promises to include revamped combat with greater depth than past titles.

RELEASE Early 2022

STRANGER OF PARADISE: FINAL FANTASY ORIGIN

If you can get past the bizarre dialogue – most of which consists of protagonist Jack talking about wanting to kill Chaos – this more action-heavy spin-off of the long-running series looks like a wild, ridiculous ride.

RELEASE March 2022

BLOOD BOWL 3

Take an orc on the wild side, as Lou Reed didn't sing, in the next instalment of gaming's most violent sport. Somehow, everybody's still taking a god named Nuffle seriously, and so *Blood Bowl* continues. The latest turn-based, ultraviolent take on American football will be soothingly familiar to fans – but with some new content thrown in.

A more fully featured solo campaign, greater customisation, four new races, systems based on the latest version of the board game's rules, new skills, *and* a new competitive mode should make for a freshly gruesome experience.

RELEASE 2022 | **DEV** Cyanide Studio | **PUB** Nacon | **LINK** cyanide-studio.com/blood-bowl-3

SAINTS ROW

RELEASE August 2022 | **DEV** Volition | **PUB** Deep Silver | **LINK** saintsrow.com

An open-world title set in America, where you and your friends do crimes? You never know, maybe it'll catch on.

The last few *Saints Row* games, featuring aliens, virtual reality worlds, supoer powers, and a musical adventure through literal Hell, weren't exactly grounded. This reboot will be reining things in (a bit) and rebooting the story, in the new fictional city of Santo Ileso. The biggest setting in the series so far, you – as ever, playing a fully customisable character dubbed only 'the Boss' – will work with your crew of trendy hipster criminals, Neenah, Kevin, and Eli, to dominate it. But with three established gangs already in charge of the streets, this takeover will be easier said than done.

You'll get a wingsuit, allowing you to leap from the top of tall buildings without fear of a messy landing (hey, I said they were reining it in *a bit*). One way perhaps to transport yourself between the game's Criminal Ventures, wholesome businesses such as drug dealing and carjacking that can strengthen your gang.

Although the release date was knocked back six months, what's been shown so far is promising. Driving is always a big part of these types of games, and the new car combat could turn out to be a genius addition. Cops on your tail? Just hurl your car into them with the new sideswipe attack, or climb onto the roof for a better shot, until their cars are trashed. Peaceful getaways are for losers, right?

TINY TINA'S WONDERLANDS

Acronym fans will be looking forward to this PC TTRPG FPS based on DLC (it's a spin-off from one of *Borderlands 2's* expnsions, *Assault on Dragon Keep*). In a first for the series, you create your own character, picking from classes including the 'Stabbomancer'.

RELEASE March 2022

STEELRISING

Eighteenth century France. Louis XVI is ruthlessly crushing the revolution with his army of steampunk robots (may not be historically accurate). It's up to you to stop him, playing as an even more advanced automaton powered by the superior force of clockwork.

RELEASE June 2022

REDFALL

Arkane's next project has a deliciously inviting horror premise. Vampires created in a science experiment gone wrong have cut off the town of Redfall from the rest of civilisation and are feasting on its inhabitants. However, a group of four survivors armed with high-tech vamp-busting tech, and some eyebrow-raising powers of their own – squad member Layla's telekinesis sure looks like a lot of fun – are ready to take on the town's pointy-toothed threat. The ability to play through this as a four-person co-op squad should add a new flavour to Arkane's distinctive immersive sim thrills.

RELEASE Winter 2022 | **DEV** Arkane | **PUB** Bethesda | **LINK** xbox.com/en-GB/games/redfall

DYING LIGHT 2

RELEASE February 4, 2022 | **DEV** Techland | **PUB** In-house | **LINK** dl2.dyinglightgame.com

Parkour zombie-bashing is finally back, as developer Techland looks ready to finally release its long-awaited sequel, which sees you plonked in the middle of the 'Modern Dark Ages' and shaping the fate of one of humanity's last surviving settlements: the City.

Said city, which is split into seven districts, is just as key to this sequel as running away from flesh-eaters, and you'll be able to make choices that will significantly affect the environment you play in. For instance, turning the water pumps on for one district means draining another, giving you a way to explore that new area… and meeting the zombies that have previously been dormant for years.

The city is also subject to an expansion of the first game's day/night cycle, where the most dangerous undead retreat to their nests during the day and spill forth into the world at night, raising the stakes for player character Aiden and the tension for us. We've already seen a gallery of mutated virals (the obligatory lore name for these zombies) that look terrifying, grotesque, and frankly not very friendly.

If you do venture out, then Aiden's acrobatic abilities should be able to help keep you alive. He's more agile than ever, wall-running, leaping across rooftops, and even using zombies to cushion his fall for daring landings. He's no slouch when it comes to handling a weapon either, still favouring melee combat, although you'll need to know when to fight and when to flee.

THE CALLISTO PROTOCOL

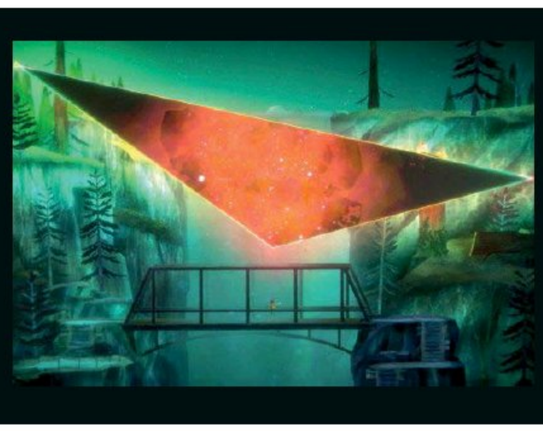
A sci-fi horror game from the director of the original *Dead Space*, set 300 years in the future of the *PUBG* universe. These mutated, tentacled monsters look equally as terrifying as hiding in a bathroom holding a frying pan, so it's all a natural fit when you think about it.

RELEASE 2022

OXENFREE II: LOST SIGNALS

After the strange events of the fantastic first game, new protagonist Riley is back in the town of Camena to investigate mysterious radio signals. Her walkie-talkie allows her to chat with all sorts who get on the frequencies, leading to plenty of spooky aural encounters.

RELEASE 2022



GHOSTWIRE TOKYO

RELEASE Autumn 2022 | **DEV** Tango Gameworks | **PUB** Bethesda | **LINK** bethesda.net/en/game/ghostwire-tokyo

The latest horror game from original *Resident Evil* director Shinji Mikami's studio sees the Tokyo population vanish, replaced with haunting apparitions and a malevolent figure cackling away on the giant screens plastered around Shibuya Crossing.

Exploring the deserted city in first person, you'll learn to master magical elemental abilities to tackle this ghostly threat. As you do so, you'll learn more about the sudden disappearance, and the mysterious and frightening 'Hannya' occultists who seem to be the culprits behind it.

As ever in a Tango Gameworks' jam, the real fun is admiring/hiding from the twisted creatures you come across, with trailers showing us spindly and faceless men in suits, a ghostly woman wielding a large pair of scissors, and headless school girls. They appear to be as haunting as *The Evil Within's* best beasties, and coupled with the neon buzz of Tokyo, this looks to be one of next year's most atmospheric games.

TRAILERS SHOW US SPINDLY AND FACELESS MEN IN SUITS AND A GHOSTLY WOMAN WIELDING A LARGE PAIR OF SCISSORS

EVIL DEAD: THE GAME

This multiplayer shooter has shades of *Friday The 13th: The Game* about it, as one set of players fights deadites as recognisable characters from the series – including, of course, Ash – while another takes control of a 'Kandarian Demon' to hunt and torment them.

RELEASE February 2022

THE OUTLAST TRIALS

This spin-off of the grisly *Outlast* series of horror games does you the kindness of letting you play co-op with up to three friends by your side. A bit of moral support should do wonders for getting you through all those jumpscares and gruesome monster encounters.

RELEASE 2022

TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER III

RELEASE February 17, 2022 | **DEV** Creative Assembly | **PUB** Sega | **LINK** totalwar.com

After two glorious *Total War: Warhammer* games and a cavalcade of DLC featuring most noteworthy factions from Games Workshop's universe, many of us were left asking what could possibly be next for the third and final game in the trilogy? Of course, there are many Warhammer factions whose units and lore aren't as well documented, as well as the semi-abstract realms of those colourful Chaos Gods, but would Creative Assembly *really* venture into this strange new territory?

Why but of course it would! And it's doing it with the exponentially growing confidence of a studio that's been intertwined with the world of Warhammer for a good seven years now. The new factions are a motley mix of the rough (Ogre Kingdoms), the regal (Kislev and Cathay), and the otherworldly, with the Daemons of Chaos divided into separate Nurgle, Tzeentch, Slaanesh, and Khorne armies.

That confidence has been palpable in all the *Total War: Warhammer III* battle footage we've seen throughout 2021. Cathay using dragons and hot air balloons to defend a great wall against the neon-firing hordes of the Lord of Change, the Ice Queen of the Slavic-inspired Kislev taking her winged lancers and War Bear Riders to the gates of hell against Khorne, and even an all-Chaos showdown in a realm of rot between the Plaguebearers of Nurgle and horny hedonists of Slaanesh.

It really is spectacular stuff – a firework ending to a trilogy that, by the end of the third game's DLC run, will have been in almost non-stop development for the best part of a decade. But beyond the bright lights and dazzle of the battlefield, it's impressive to see how Creative Assembly is digging ever-deeper into making each faction's campaigns feel distinct. Where the first *Total War: Warhammer* played things relatively safe, the second really mixed things up, and the success of that experiment has propelled Creative Assembly to go all out in weird and wonderful campaign mechanics for the third game.

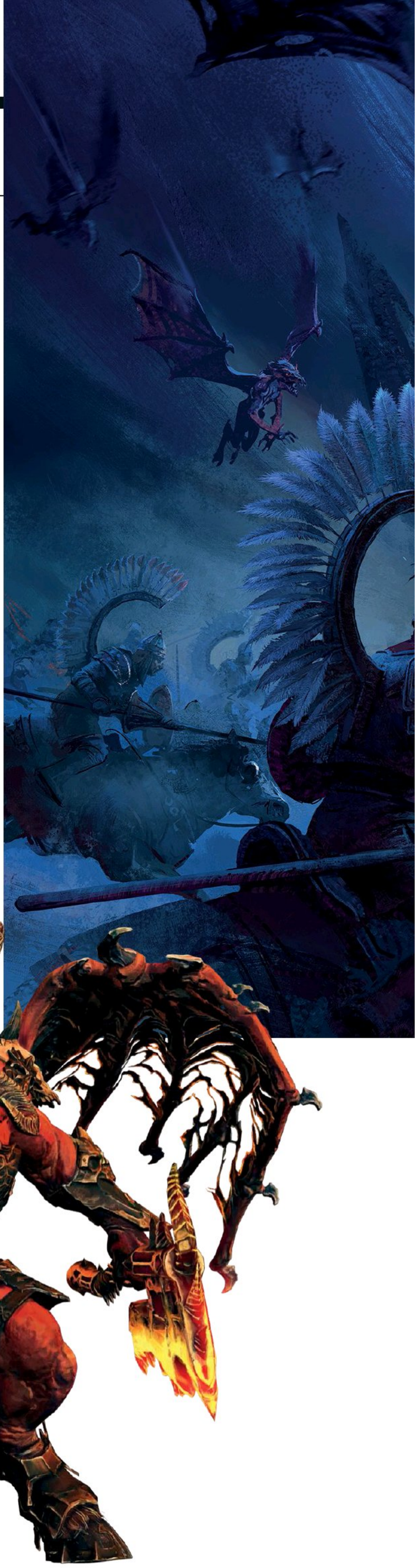
As you might imagine, Chaos factions aren't too keen on cramming themselves into human settlements, so their focus is very much on spreading their respective god's kinks throughout the mortal realms. Nurgle turns human settlements into foetid fields, while Tzeentch, God of Change, can mess with the campaign map like a cheating child with a board game – tracking armies, messing with enemy turns, and even transferring control of settlement between different factions.

GODS DAMN IT

The campaign map looks set to be more alive than ever, constantly changing to reflect the advances and schemings of the Chaos Gods, while Cathay and Kislev attempt to keep them at bay.

Then there are the little things, like tiered cities and the ability to build barricades in them, giving depth to the urban combat that's been oddly lacking throughout the 20-plus year history of the *Total War* series.

Nurgle only knows how this most out-there of entries in an already out-there series will merge into the Mortal Empires campaign, which will eventually contain the maps and factions from all three games in the series. However it ends up looking, in a series that has so far answered all questions with the force of a Mournfang Cavalry charge, we have no reason to doubt they'll do it right.



BEACON PINES

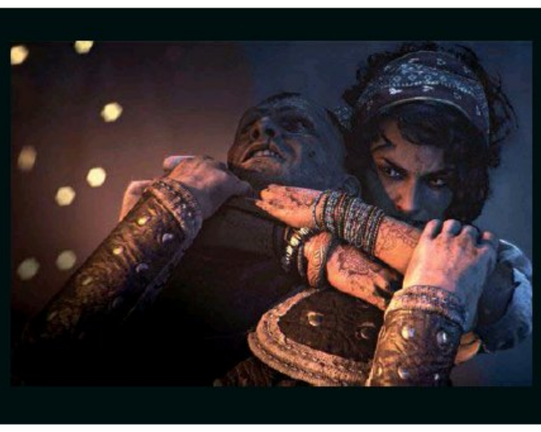
Adorable artwork disguises a surprisingly creepy atmosphere in this adventure game through a magical storybook. By changing words in the text, you can alter the direction of the tale – and change the fates of the various characters within it, for better or worse.

RELEASE 2022

A PLAGUE TALE: REQUIEM

The first game left a lot on the table by the end – both in terms of dangling story threads and untapped potential in its rat-based puzzles. We're hoping this swarming sequel will round out the concept more fully as it takes us to new regions of its alt-history world.

RELEASE 2022



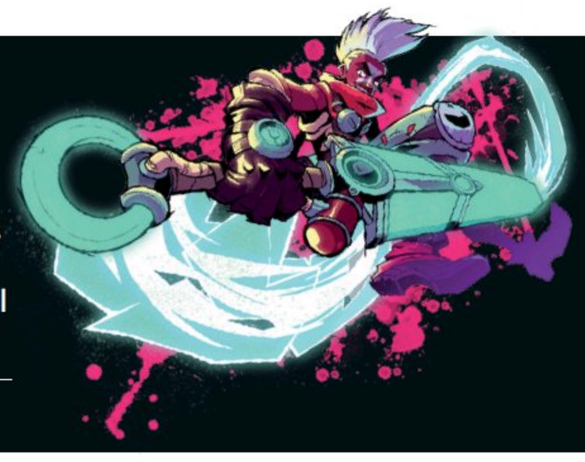
2022 PREVIEW

AS YOU MIGHT IMAGINE, CHAOS FACTIONS AREN'T TOO KEEN ON CRAMMING THEMSELVES INTO HUMAN SETTLEMENTS

CONVERGENCE: A LEAGUE OF LEGENDS STORY

Another 'Riot Forge' release – set in the *League of Legends* universe, but from a different dev – this action-platformer lets champion Ekko take the spotlight. His time-travel powers offer loads of potential for rapid-fire fun, and the art style is a joy.

RELEASE 2022



SONG OF NUNU: A LEAGUE OF LEGENDS STORY

This one's a Riot Forge game too, a third-person adventure from the creators of indie darling *RIME* that focuses on the friendship between fun-loving child Nunu and his best friend Willump, who happens to be an enormous yeti.

RELEASE 2022

2022 PREVIEW

TWO POINT CAMPUS

RELEASE 2022 | **DEV** Two Point Studios | **PUB** Sega | **LINK** twopointcampus.com

Two Point Studios' previous release, a slapstick hospital management sim, was a surprise hit whose anarchic sense of humour belied a complex and demanding little game. Two Point is now looking to bring the same sort of experience to the halls of higher learning. *Campus* promises a great deal of freedom with how you can lay out your school, and the developer has stated that it wants to encourage player creativity.

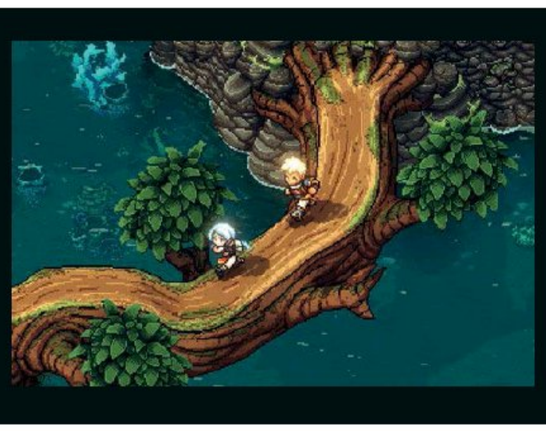
Pre-release content indicates Two Point's sense of humour is as present as before. For example: you can send your students to 'knight school' where they learn the ways of chivalry as opposed to business management. Other oddballs you can make out from Two Point's trailers include wizards, clowns, robots, and chefs, all life paths I wish my own college had offered me. It'll be up to you whether you wind up with an Oxford University or an Honest Joe's Discount Academy when *Two Point Campus* releases later this year.

CAMPUS PROMISES A GREAT DEAL OF FREEDOM WITH HOW YOU CAN LAY OUT YOUR SCHOOL

SEA OF STARS

A top-down, turn-based RPG highly reminiscent of SNES classics like *Chrono Trigger* and *Secret of Mana*, *Sea of Stars* boasts a unique setting, striking art style, and a character-driven story centred on a six-person adventuring party who wield 'Eclipse Magic' against 'the Fleshmancer'.

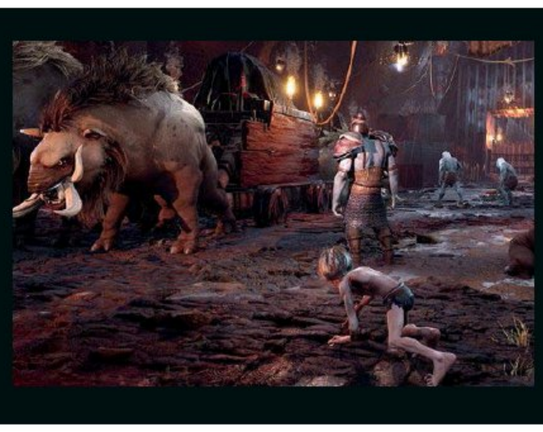
RELEASE 2022



THE LORD OF THE RINGS: GOLLUM

This prequel adventure lets you step into the shoes of everyone's favourite shriveled little ghoul. Or, er, it would if he ever wore shoes. You'll need to sneak your way around Mordor in a story set before the events of LOTR and The Hobbit.

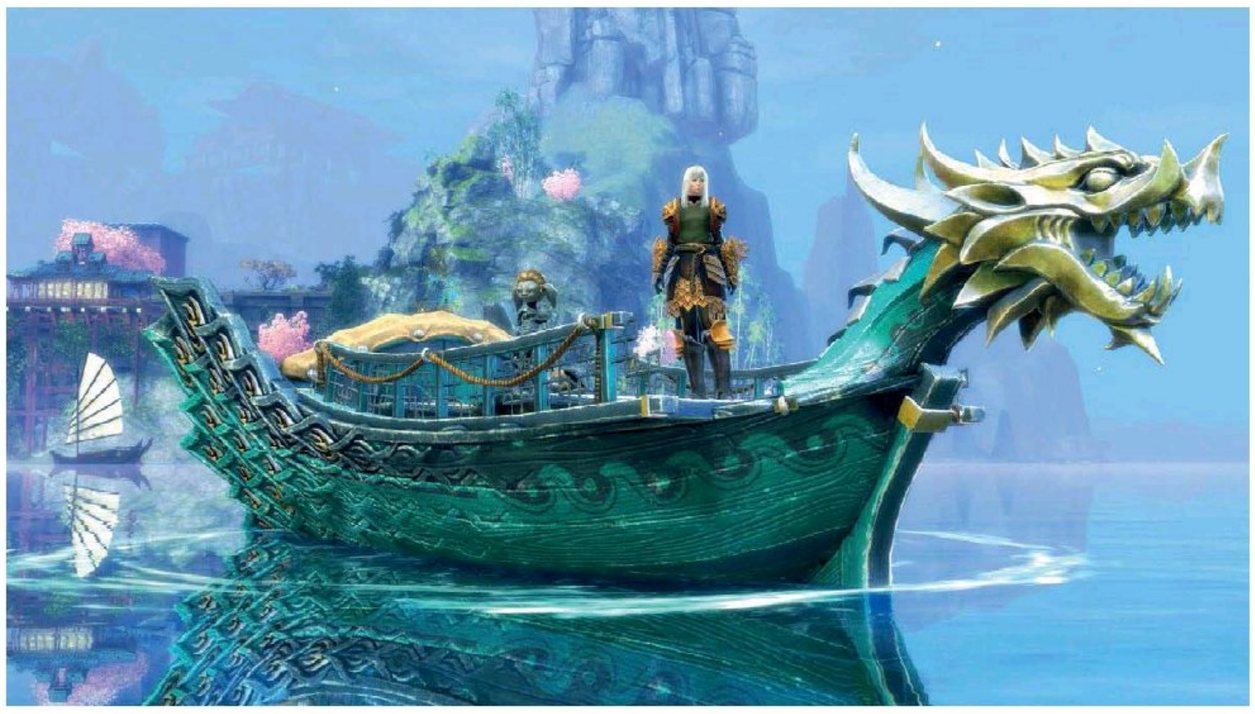
RELEASE Spring 2022



DESTINY 2: THE WITCH QUEEN

If there's one thing *Destiny* players love more than the game itself, it's complaining about *Destiny*. Sometimes it's just gamer bluster, but often it's a perfectly understandable response to *how close* Bungie can get to looter shooter perfection and just miss the mark. *The Witch Queen* promises a new zone, the introduction of weapon crafting, and a new glaive weapon type. Hopefully I and the other baying wolves of the *Destiny* community will find what we're looking for in *Destiny 2*'s fourth expansion.

RELEASE February 22, 2022 | **DEV** Bungie | **PUB** In-house | **LINK** bungie.net



GUILD WARS 2: END OF DRAGONS

RELEASE February 2022 | **DEV** ArenaNet | **PUB** NCSoft | **LINK** bit.ly/3GhmdC5

The venerable MMO *Guild Wars 2* is about to receive its third expansion pack as it enters its tenth year of life. *End of Dragons* will see players return to the land of Cantha, a vibrant fantasy counterpart to China, for the first time since the *Factions* expansion to the first *Guild Wars* released in 2006. The plot will centre on the lore of this isolated land, formerly isolated from the rest of the world for one hundred years, and prominently features a great sea frozen into solid jade by some mysterious magical force.

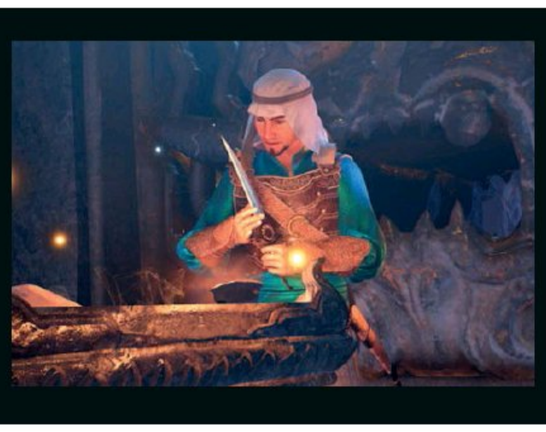
In addition to the new zone and story content, *End of Dragons* is adding further level 80 specialisation options to each of its base professions. The one that particularly caught my eye is the samurai-like 'Bladesworn' specialisation for Warriors, as it grants access to that most essential of videogame weapons: the gunsword. Melee in ranged in one – nothing beats that.

We at PC Gamer are also very excited for the new rocket-propelled Siege Turtle mounts, truly wise and fearsome companions for this upcoming adventure. While *Guild Wars 2* lacks the high profile of other MMOs like *Final Fantasy XIV* or *The Elder Scrolls Online*, it has maintained a consistent and passionate player-base, bolstered by regular updates between its more infrequent expansion releases. The launch of *End of Dragons* might be the perfect time to jump back into the world of *Guild Wars 2* after a hiatus, or even to jump in and give it a try for the first time.

PRINCE OF PERSIA: SANDS OF TIME REMAKE

Sands of Time is a platforming classic, melding parkour-based movement with a swashbuckling story. Ubisoft's upcoming remake offers an interpretation of that game's gameplay with shiny modern rendering tech.

RELEASE 2022



DRAGON BALL: THE BREAKERS

This bizarre asymmetric multiplayer game takes cues from *Dead By Daylight*, having one player adopt the role of a classic Dragon Ball Z villain like Cell, who evolves and grows in power while seven others play as regular humans trying to hold out till Goku arrives to save them.

RELEASE 2022

25
FORD
25
HORIZON

BEST OPEN WORLD

BEST ACTION

BEST MULTIPLAYER

BEST STRATEGY

BEST HORROR

BEST ONGOING

BEST CHARACTERS

BEST STEALTH

BEST NARRATIVE

BEST RPG

BEST DESIGN

BEST CO-OP

GAME OF THE YEAR

AUSTRALIA'S #1 PC GAMING MAG

PC PowerPlay

SINCE 1996

GAME OF THE YEAR

2021

Celebrating the absolute best of the last 12 months of PC gaming

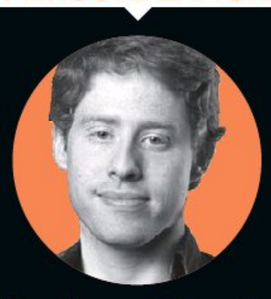
PERSONAL PICK

Robin Valentine

DORFROMANTIK

This year I was really looking for videogames to be my calm, chill escape from an increasingly weird and stressful reality. So you can understand why I fell so in love with this gentle puzzle game about building idyllic little countryside towns, one tile at a time. I'm terrible at actually scoring points, but I'm always completing the true objective: creating a place I'd love to go on holiday.

PERSONAL PICK



Wesley Fenlon

CRUELTY SQUAD

Surely the result of a food poisoning fever dream, *Cruelty Squad* also gleefully aims to depict what rancid sushi does to your body as a first-person shooter. Playing *Cruelty Squad* is bathing in wall-to-wall puke textures and embracing the filthiness of a hypercapitalist existence where you sell body parts on the stock exchange and use your own intestines as a grappling hook. The open-ended missions are a genuine treat to puzzle out.

PC PowerPlay BEST ONGOING 2021

APEX LEGENDS

Nat Clayton: *Apex Legends* has always been good. But for those first few years it felt like Respawn was still figuring out how to run an ongoing battle royale. But in 2021 the studio nailed it. Season 9 is the clear standout, bringing us not only a strong new character in Valkyrie, but a new Arenas game mode – a distinctly Respawn take on *Counter-Strike* that lets you immediately get into a fair fight. Arenas proved that *Apex* has legs beyond battle royale, cementing the game as not just a good BR, but one of the best team shooters around.

But it also feels like *Apex* is just so much more confident this year, both as a game and as a world. Respawn's storytelling has gone into overdrive, bringing in community artists, and animators to help flesh out the world, while leaning fully into voice lines and BR downtime to bring the game's cast to life. *Apex* is a soap opera now, and every new season escalates the drama between our sci-fi buds.

The game's latest season, Escape, has only reinvigorated my excitement for the game after a somewhat lacklustre tenth season. Like Olympus, Storm Point is a gorgeous reimagining of what an *Apex* map can look like, and Ash is a strong initiator who managed to be more than mere *Titanfall 2* nostalgia. But at the end of the day, Apex is still the best and only shooter for punting yourself down a hill at 400mph as a floating Scottish lass. What more could you ever ask for?

EACH NEW MAP MANAGES TO BRING ITS OWN PERSONALITY

Phil Savage: There's a lot of personality in *Apex*'s maps, and – as each gets tweaked and upgraded over its seasons and through Town Takeover events – plenty of history too. King's Canyon has covered its vast empty spaces with new attractions, and World's Edge is breaking apart at the seams. Despite this, each new map manages to bring its own personality. The most recent, Storm Point, feels like a strong reaction to earlier maps, with more clearly defined routes that funnel players into conflict in interesting ways.

The strength of *Apex*'s third year is that there's always something new to learn. But the enduring appeal of *Apex* as a whole is that it's built on such an enjoyable foundation. Try sliding into a teamfight, SMGs blazing, and tell me any other battle royale is worth your time. ■

PC PowerPlay BEST CO-OP 2021

BACK 4 BLOOD

★ **Evan Lahti:** Before it released, we were concerned that adding aim-down-sights to the *Left 4 Dead* formula would slow it down too much. But *Back 4 Blood*'s guns are silky in your hands, containing nuance that exceeds their appearance.

As an FPS fan I love the attention to detail: the hip fire animation changes when you drop to a crouch, communicating clearly that you're more accurate than standing, but less accurate than if you were in ironsights. Range matters. You can kit out a horde killer by grabbing attachments and card bonuses that increase bullet penetration.

The high volume of enemies and the fact that so many guns are one-hit kills against basic undead feels great. Lately I'm lugging around the .50 calibre sniper rifle as an anti-'big guy' gun, with the silenced Magnum as a sidearm.

Morgan Park: Were I still on my first playthrough of *Back 4 Blood*, I would've thought Evan silly for carrying the big sniper rifle that shoots slow. But now that I'm jumping back into the campaign on a higher difficulty, having a marksman for the nastier infected hordes is not only smart, but necessary. I think that speaks to *Back 4 Blood*'s strengths over *Left 4 Dead*: the game pushes you to try new things, and it's not only replayable because shooting zombies is fun. There's always a new deck to test out, a gun you've not given a proper try yet, or a nasty combo of Corruption Cards that puts a twist on a mission you've done before. It's *Left 4 Dead*, but more, and often better.

Jacob Ridle: I've never had as much fun benchmarking a game as I did in *Back 4 Blood*, and that was in the company of the game's confused bots. Seriously, I ran the same level maybe 30 times, and I genuinely enjoyed every run. If you have a cheery bunch of zombie-annihilating hobbyists to play with, there's a lot of replayability in this game. The cards system makes each level feel a little different to the last, and with buffs, for both player and zombie, you'll find you end up with a different playstyle nearly every run. ■

PC PowerPlay BEST MULTIPLAYER 2021

CHIVALRY 2

★ **Morgan Park:** In a world of multiplayer games that are either ultra competitive or glorified checklists, *Chivalry 2* is a rare game that just wants you to hop into a match and go effin wild. Objectives are little more than set dressing for the game's impressively massive 64-player battles. You can push the battering ram toward the castle with your team, but no one will begrudge you for ignoring it and going on kicking spree instead. One time I decided I'm allergic to swords and was only allowed to kill people with dismembered arms and heads (it went surprisingly well).

Evan Lahti: If you've ever practiced a martial art, you know how crucial it is to manage and manipulate distance to beat an opponent. *Chivalry 2* manages to contain this aspect of authenticity without going all-in on fussy medieval realism. It feels unbelievably good to survive a 3v1 by dodging at the right time, or forcing enemies to wallop one another with unexpected footwork.

This is a rare competitive multiplayer game that understands the value of being messy. Sometimes a catapult shot drops out of the sky and insta-kills me and five of my teammates. Over-enthusiastic teammates will hit you in the back of the head with their falchion. Archers are an absolute nuisance, cowardly arrow-lobbers who can kill with impunity. But *Chivalry 2* embraces these warped aspects as charming texture. There's a dedicated button for letting everyone around you know that you want to 'Kill the archers'. I press it often.

Tyler Wilde: I love how *Chivalry 2* balances negativity with positivity. When you die, you can tap a key to commend the knight who decapitated you, if they deserve it. A couple of times I looked for that key in *Battlefield 2042* and was disappointed not to find it. And like Evan says, the combat is subtler than it can look. You've got to use footwork to find openings, and find a rhythm without being predictable. It's a bit like boxing. But with swords. ■

PC PowerPlay BEST RPG 2021

WILDERMYTH

Robin Valentine: I don't think any videogame has ever more successfully evoked the feel of a tabletop RPG. A few hours in *Wildermyth* is like a supercut of a fantastic year-long Dungeons & Dragons campaign. With the procedural systems as your dungeon master, you follow the lives and adventures of entire parties of heroes, each organically growing and developing in all sorts of unexpected directions. And they really are unexpected – while it's perfectly possible for a warrior to just find a magic sword and kill a dragon with it, it's equally likely they'll be cursed to slowly transform into living crystal, or make a pact with an ancient tree, or upset a witch who turns their head into a raven's.

They even age, and fall in love, and have children; eventually they'll retire, if they survive the adventurer's life. They're never really gone, though – your favourites become legacy heroes who can return rejuvenated in subsequent campaigns, like pulling out your favourite old character sheet for yet another dungeon run.

Combine all that with really interesting, tactical combat and a great meta layer that sees you adventuring across the land while trying to keep it free of invasion and corruption, and you've got a recipe for some of the most memorable non-linear stories I've ever experienced. This is the emotional investment of *XCOM* times 100, and it's great seeing a videogame draw on the actual feel of tabletop RPGs, instead of just their mechanics or settings.

Just make sure you crank up the difficulty – your heroes' journeys and the tactical challenges of combat are both more compelling when death lurks near. Campaigns become tales of desperate resistance in the face of overwhelming odds, and that's just tasty drama.

CAMPAIGNS BECOME TALES OF DESPERATE RESISTANCE

Jody Macgregor: I wasn't sure about *Wildermyth* at first. I liked the magic and the papercraft monsters hopping around like invisible hands are picking them up, though the adventurers resemble smug protagonists of early 2000s webcomics. They shouldn't be fighting mythic beasts, they should be arguing about Xbox games on a couch.

But I kept playing and I'm glad I did. In a great campaign called 'Eluna and the Moth', I brought back old characters alongside fresh ones, and though reset to first level they progressed in other ways. One's flame-arm spread to cover other limbs, another went from having wings to just being a crow. Their relationships deepened as well, developing romances and rivalries that played into how they fought together. As Robin says, it's like a tabletop campaign that runs for ages, players coming and going, all the stories getting tangled up together. ■

PC PowerPlay

BEST OPEN WORLD 2021

FORZA HORIZON 5

Phil Savage: Once again, Playground Games has stitched together a massive patchwork representation of a place, and filled it full of theme park delights. There's the Baja Desert, where you can smash into cacti to build up a massive skill combo. There's La Gran Caldera,
an active volcano with twisting dirt roads and a mountainside that's just begging to be used for offroad stunts. There's jungle and farmland and a big airstrip for drag races.

In short, *Forza Horizon 5*'s Mexico makes for a varied car playground. In terms of construction, it's much the same as Australia and the UK before it: different biomes that prioritise fun over realism, and that are filled with enough races, challenges and collectibles to keep you exploring for hundreds of hours.

Yes, we could have given *Forza Horizon 5* a 'Best Racing' award and been done with it, but to do so would have been to miss the point. The racing is a part of the *Forza Horizon* series, sure, but more than that it's an enthusiastic celebration of videogame driving. Cars are handed out like RPG loot, and they're used for more than just its vast series of checkpoint races. There are 'PR stunts' that each celebrate a different discipline, from drifting to doing inadvisably massive jumps. There are sidestories that set you specific goals as you're transformed into, for instance, the stunt driver of some ridiculous action blockbuster. There's even a surprisingly decent battle royale mode.

THIS SERIES REMAINS THE PINNACLE OF THE FORM

In most games, a giant open world full of icons would exhaust me. But in *Forza Horizon 5*, each is a guarantee of something fun to do in a car. If you love racing games, this series remains the pinnacle of the form.

Jacob Ridley: Ahead of *Forza Horizon 5*'s release, I was still playing *Forza Horizon 4*. I never really put it down. So the fact that *Forza Horizon 5* feels very much a shinier version of that same game, well, that's all I could've asked for.

There's a ton of beauty in the Mexican map and a whole lot to do. Though, saying that, I found I spent my first few hours on a joy ride for no other reason than the thrill of the drive and the beauty of the landscape. ■

PERSONAL PICK

Lauren Aitken

ASSASSIN'S CREED VALHALLA: WRATH OF THE DRUIDS

I haven't had a lot of time to play games in 2021, so it's unsurprising that my GOTY is actually some DLC. *Wrath of the Druids* took Eivor off to Ireland and it was a lovely departure from fighting around England. I enjoyed following Ciara around and listening to her sing between fighting the creepy and mysterious druids and exploring parts of Ireland I'm familiar with.

PERSONAL PICK

Natalie Clayton

UNBEATABLE: WHITE LABEL

Unbeatable is without question the coolest game I played this year, and it's not even done yet. Despite being a Kickstarter demo with a handful of songs, *White Label* is a banging rhythm game in its own right, serving up anime-tinted pop rock beats and VHS visuals, and has even dropped a few extra tracks over the year. Mark my words – when *Unbeatable* hits for real, I won't be talking about anything else.

PC PowerPlay BEST CHARACTERS 2021

GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY

Fraser Brown: My love for *Guardians of the Galaxy* makes me feel very basic – a big Marvel action game with quips, how novel! – but I can't help myself. It's an incredibly entertaining jaunt through colourful alien planets, cop-infested spaceships, and a city chilling out inside the skull of cosmic god, elevated beyond a popcorn-munching diversion by the Guardians themselves.

Star-Lord is a man-child leading a bickering team of semi-reformed criminals who don't respect him. He's the only member of the Guardians you'll directly control, and starting out you're a bit of a punching bag. But over the course of the 15-hour adventure, the team becomes a support system, helping each other work through trauma in genuinely heartwarming and heartbreaking moments. And when things threaten to get sickeningly sentimental, there's guaranteed to be a joke or a fight right around the corner to give you time to dry those tears.

It's very 2021 – a comedy action game that's secretly a big therapy session. These different sides never trip over each other, either – it's all holistic. When you're exploring a planet or fighting some space cops, the Guardians are always chatting away, forging bonds, working through shit or firing out meme-worthy running gags. The heroes-in-training and their punchy dialogue might be the high point, but it also makes everything else so much better. I've been a fan of this lot since they first teamed up in 2008, but this might be the best they've ever been.

AN UNCHARTED GAME WITH BETTER CHARACTERS

Morgan Park: *Guardians* is basically *Uncharted* with better characters. All of the enjoyable hours spent shooting, climbing, and walking are really just sponges for hours of engrossing, funny chatter between teammates. I love that even during a fight or treacherous climb, the game makes you an active participant in every conversation with binary dialogue choices. Not every choice has an impact on the mission, but you often set the group's mood with your input. Before long, keeping everyone's spirits high became as important as shooting straight.

As someone who's never cared for the world or characters of *Deus Ex*, I'm thoroughly impressed that Eidos has whipped up a better version of the Guardians than the MCU could ever dream of. ■

PERSONAL PICK

Evan Lahti

LEMNIS GATE

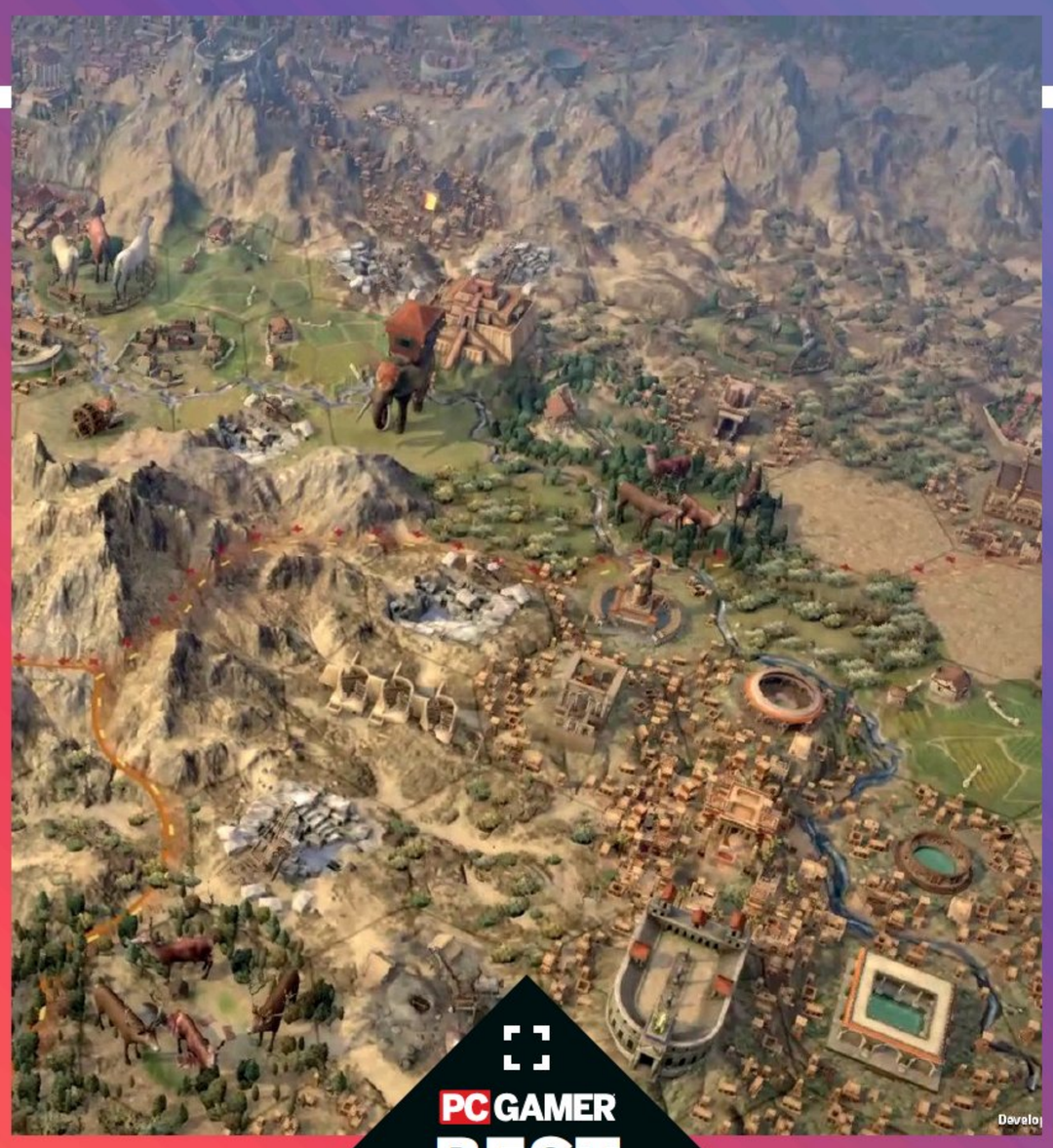
In a gaming year defined by time gimmicks, *Lemnis Gate* managed to quietly turn the FPS into something much more like 3D chess. You and your opponent deploy characters one by one, playing out their actions in a 25-second span. Your fourth move might be a landmine that alters the history of the match, erasing the moment that your opponent captured an objective. A smart game worth celebrating.

PERSONAL PICK

Fraser Brown

THE ASCENT

I'm a simple man who loves bright lights, big guns, and stupid clothes, and *The Ascent* gives me all three by the truckload. This cyberpunk action-RPG is a stunning, explosive romp through a dazzling but simultaneously filthy megacity. An early weapon lets you spew a barrage of rockets like a machine gun, and that really sets the tone for the whole thing. When it comes out, the party begins.



PC GAMER
BEST STRATEGY
2021

OLD WORLD

Fraser Brown: I've dreamed of splicing all my favourite games with *Crusader Kings* at some point or another, but few more so than *Civilization*. Firaxis' series has spawned some genuine masterpieces, but it's also starting to feel a bit familiar and unadventurous, especially compared to Paradox's wildly ambitious and proudly weird grand strategy RPG. Could the best parts of both coexist in a single game? *Old World* proved they could, while also being a fantastic historical 4X in its own right.

Old World is a game of building empires and expanding cities, but with heaps of human drama and complications, and both aspects interact with each other in interesting ways. When you found a city, for instance, you have to make a single family its ruler. Each comes with unique mechanical bonuses, but there's also your relationship with the families to consider, and the people who belong to them. Maybe you'll give it to the family of your favourite general and best mate, or use it as an olive branch to mend things with a family you've pissed off. All the intrigue and strategy exist in harmony, even if things aren't looking so great at court.

It's so much more than *Civ* with *Crusader Kings*' humanity, though. Mohawk Games and designer Soren Johnson have also reconsidered a big list of 4X systems, as well as finding ways to make the genre more manageable without sacrificing complexity – sometimes they add even more interesting opportunities. The Orders system is fantastic for this very reason. It ostensibly limits how much you can do in a single turn, teaching you to prioritise, but that limitation can be neutralised by making certain decisions that will shape your civilisation and ruler. Simpler but just as welcome, you can undo any action you take, or an entire turn. It's great for fixing silly mistakes, but it's also a boon for experimentation and learning the ropes.

All this, combined with its more focused timeframe – the name's a giveaway – and fairly brisk campaign make it easy to get stuck into, but it's still dense and sometimes opaque. I thought it was great at launch, but I can appreciate it even more now. ■

PC PowerPlay
BEST ACTION
2021

DEATHLOOP

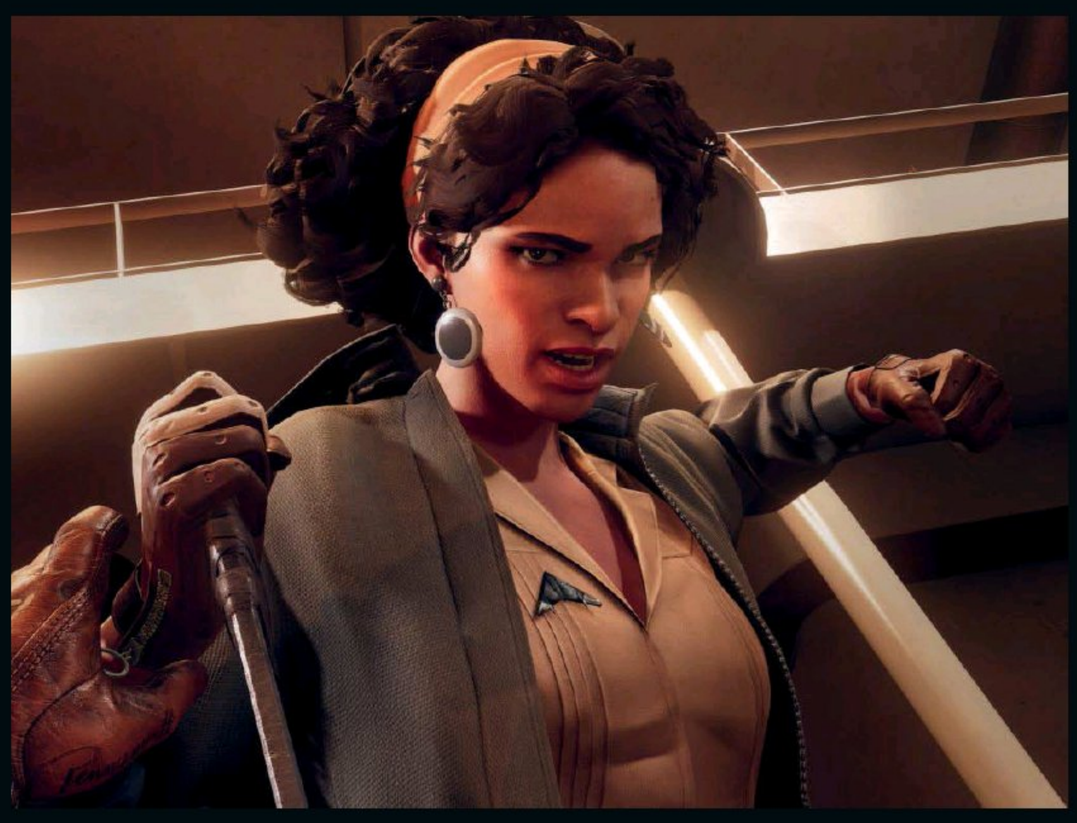
Phil Savage: Finally, an Arkane game that dares you to let your hair down. Where *Dishonored* wagged its finger at high-chaos murder and mayhem, *Deathloop* positively revels in it. Sure, your overall objective is to break the very timeloop that lets you fight and kill without consequence, but along the way it's constantly asking: do you really want this to end? Are you not having fun?

I am having fun. It's easy to miss how good Arkane's combat usually is, because there's a sense that being quiet and nonlethal is the right way to play. In *Deathloop*, the lack of a quickload key means that, if you're spotted, you're unable to correct your mistake. And eventually you start to ask if being noticed is even a mistake at all. You've got an arsenal of cool guns, and a selection of powers that make you really good at taking out your targets. Is it really so bad to use them?

It's all underpinned by the invasion system, where other players can join your game in an attempt to hunt you down. These cat-and-mouse battles let you use the full breadth of *Deathloop*'s many systems, in encounters that are as hilarious as they are tense. There's little more satisfying than turning an invader's impatience against them as you slowly manipulate the environment to your advantage. And, as an invader, it feels great to weaponise the added tension of your sudden appearance – goading your quarry into making a mistake that costs them their life.

Deathloop has as much in common with Arkane's entertainingly messy *Dark Messiah: Might & Magic* as it does with the seminal *Dishonored* series, and it's all the better for it.

Jody Macgregor: *Deathloop* does feel like Arkane's response to people who felt pressured to sneak through *Dishonored*. That's how I'd have played whether it felt right or not, so *Deathloop* – with its guilt-free murderthons and, instead of quicksaves, a modern take on ye olde three lives – shouldn't be for me. And yet I kicked people off cliffs, ran across rooftops, set off dominos to drop a landmine on someone's head, and loved it all. ■



PC PowerPlay BEST STEALTH 2021

HITMAN 3

Fraser Brown: For the site, I wrote a far-too-revealing feature about really wanting a game where Agent 47 chases me. Then I tried to get Andy Kelly to ask Agent 47 voice actor David Bateson to record himself saying, "I'm coming to get you, Fraser". He chickened out and now he is dead (to me). You could say I really got into *Hitman 3*.

It's weird to think of it as a stealth game. In one of the most out-there missions, I spent my first attempt in-character as a detective in an Agatha Christie knock-off, right up until the point where I killed my target. There are more traditionally sneaky routes through every map, of course, but *Hitman*'s all about that social stealth, and *3* has some of the strongest examples out of the whole trilogy. Agent 47 gets plenty of chances to show off his acting chops, even though they still just amount to putting on a disguise and acting and sounding just like his regular spooky self.

The murder mystery in Dartmoor and the elaborate Chongqing mission are where we get to see IO at its most experimental, but for the purists there's Berlin and the sandbox of a nightclub. You've got targets you know nothing about and no plan so, at least for that first playthrough, it's all about reacting and going with your instincts. It would have probably made for a better climax than the actual final mission, the game's only dud.

Phil Savage: Berlin really is emblematic of what makes *Hitman 3* so good. *Hitman 2*'s levels were bigger, but the sequel has a playful confidence to it – exploring the edges of what makes a great stealth sandbox to great effect.

Here, in this underground club, you're tasked with taking out the ICA agents that are there to hunt you. Rather than a single target with a handful of big, obvious routes leading to their demise, you're instead left to work out a series of more small-scale assassinations. Arguably this is *Hitman* at its purest: just ingenuity and opportunism at your disposal.

IT'S ALSO WORTH CELEBRATING THE QUALITY OF IO'S LEVEL DESIGN

As Fraser mentioned, *Hitman*'s stock-in-trade is social stealth – playing dress-up to hide in plain sight and walk among your victims. But it's also worth celebrating the continued quality of IO's level design. Your first playthroughs will likely be defined by the showcase solutions – Dartmoor's detective being the most obvious example. But each level is also designed to support its many optional challenges, the pinnacle of which is silently completing a mission without ever donning a disguise. Attempt this and you'll discover new options – clever ways a level is made to reveal possibilities that you missed on your first visit. This design is what makes *Hitman 3* not just a great stealth game, but a near endlessly replayable one too – that scales to support whatever challenge you want to throw at it. ■

PC PowerPlay BEST HORROR 2021

RESIDENT EVIL VILLAGE

★ **Jacob Ridley:** *Resident Evil Village* is a much more fast-paced game than you might expect off the back of *Resident Evil 7: Biohazard*. For that, it's the *Resident Evil* game I'd recommend to those who haven't tried a *Resi* game before, as in between all the body horror there's a whole lot of running and gunning.

It also blends so many excellent horror game staples into a single, fluent game. Each primary 'area' of the map feels like a discrete experience, some more action focused and others more downright haunting. And each one home to a well-written, and well-acted, paranormal mob boss figure. *Resident Evil Village* feels like a horror game built to cater to most horror fans, and while usually that might appear overreaching, Capcom manages to thread the needle exceptionally well.

Harry Shepherd: I skipped *Resident Evil 7*, but totally not because I was too scared. And I can prove it: I played *Resident Evil Village*. But it means my last experience of the series was the terminally bloated action movie, *Resident Evil 6*, and Ethan's terrifying jaunt through Castle Dimitrescu could hardly be more different. In the best way possible. It also reasserted to me how useful it is to have fully-functioning hands.

Anyway, where *Resident Evil 6* was overlong, over the top, and needed the reset of *7* to get back to what the series is best at: scares. *Village* takes that a step further: It's tighter, more focused, and, most importantly, blood-curdling. As Jacob says, each area feels distinct. They're a series of neat, horrifying episodes that feel fresh enough that, while Lady D is sent packing quicker than you might expect, you don't really mind.

IT'S TIGHTER, MORE FOCUSED, AND BLOOD-CURDLING

Village boasts plenty of fearsome moments, even when you're armed to the teeth. In what feels like no time at all after admiring the reveal of the Gothic castle, you're surrounded by werewolves, left scrapping for survival with a mixture of bullets, red barrels, and dumb luck. I was at my most afraid in these moments.

That said, for all the gratifying guns, the section in which they're all taken away will always live longest in the memory. The tall vampire that stole the show ahead of release may cast a long shadow, but hidden behind her was one of the scariest horror sequences I've ever played. ■

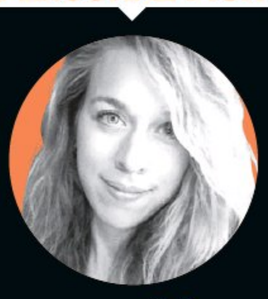
PERSONAL PICK

Tyler Colp

NIER REPLICANT

I played *Nier Replicant* because I didn't like *Nier: Automata*. The latter game felt overwrought for a familiar story about robots with feelings. This year, I discovered that *Nier Replicant* was always the better game, blending a tragic, and sometimes comedic story with a beloved main cast. It's a game that digs into people and their desires instead of simply suggesting it. It's devastatingly honest, and I needed that this year.

PERSONAL PICK



Lauren Morton

TOEM

Toem may be as prescriptive in its quest checklist as any adventure game, but it lets you get silly and personalise the details. Solving problems for the residents of its cute, colourless world always requires pulling out your instant camera, but there's a playfulness in deciding how to set up each requested shot after you puzzle out what's being asked for. Do you take a selfie with a dog? Whip out your foam finger?

PC PowerPlay BEST DESIGN 2021

LOOP HERO

★ **Evan Lahti:** This mighty little RPG got 50 hours out of me over the course of reviewing it. It's remarkably distilled. If *Diablo* is a ten-gallon tank of pleasant ARPG liquid, *Loop Hero* is a thimble of hyperconcentrated essence. The loop: build the level. Fight enemies (automatically). Equip loot they drop. Repeat. How does combat feel this engaging when you have essentially zero control over it? The retro sound design has a lot to do with it, steeping the whole game in a Halloween-y vibe and making weapon impacts, harpy claws, and shattered shields feel sharp.

Like the sprawling deckbuilder genre that *Slay the Spire* spawned, I hope we'll see more of this sort of thing across different themes. I can easily imagine a multiplayer version of this where you're building a board for an opponent, not unlike *Legion TD 2*.

Graeme Meredith: You see a lot of games on the indie side of things trying to replicate or re-establish retrovisuals. More often than not it's just a practical means to an end, but the best ones really exemplify that the early years of gaming only really scratched the surface of the potential in pixel art graphics.

Not only does *Loop Hero* provide a lavish visual experience with that aesthetic, it's one of the very best 'non-specific CRT era' style games I've seen, and it's a key part of why it's so addictive. The vibrating scan lines, grimy sprite work and rattly sound effects suck you in and keep you looping your way round these maps of your own design for hours.

That, and the rumour mill it creates for itself – something typical in pre-internet gaming, but rarely seen these days. Get talking with a friend or two, sharing in the experience, and each of you might have noticed or discovered something different or unusual while running the loop. It fills you with an eagerness to share information. So it's not just the gameplay or the visuals that transfixes you, it's the time and place *Loop Hero* creates around you that makes it such a stand out this year. ■

PC PowerPlay BEST NARRATIVE 2021

SABLE

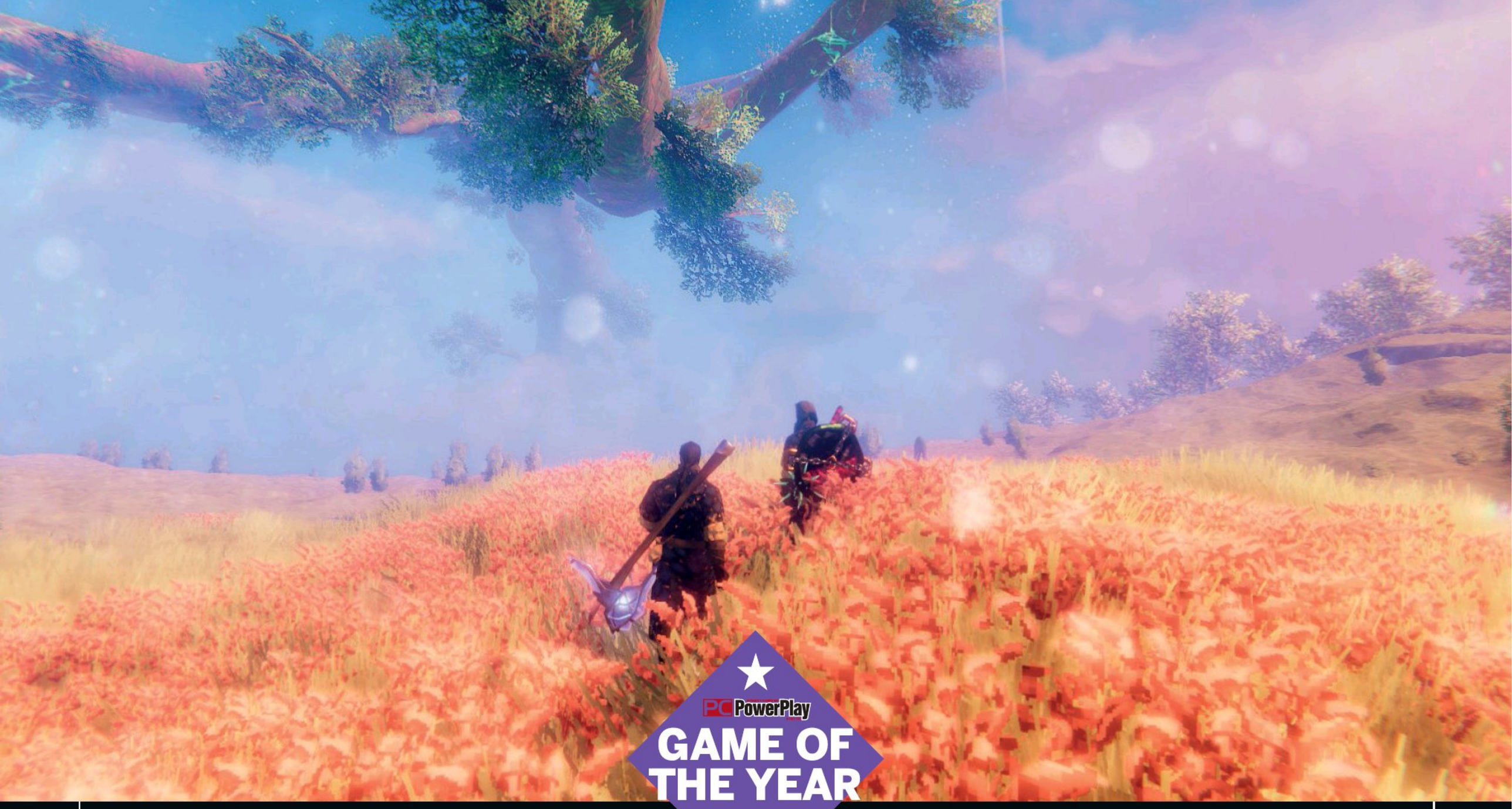
★ **Nat Clayton:** The hero of this desert adventure doesn't save the world. There's no existential threat, no looming war or ancient MacGuffin to recover. In fact, *Sable* doesn't really have much of a plot at all – and yet, within an hour of firing up the game, a passing conversation brought me to the brink of tears.

Sable is a coming-of-age story. A rite of passage that sees you leaving your family behind to explore the world and figure out who, exactly, you want to be. Every quest, every conversation, every mask and piece of clothing is there in service of finding an identity for the titular glider. Throughout the game you'll be choosing conversation options and outfitting your bike not because you need to optimise stats or grind reputations, but because it's what feels right for your Sable at that moment. Every mask you acquire is quite literally another face to try on.

There is simply such an earnest warmth to *Sable*'s writing. Almost every conversation you have is fleeting and incidental, but penned with such absolute earnestness that it's hard not to well up. You'll meet an old guard who's chosen to embark on her own journey of discovery late in life, and even the most sour-faced shopkeep meets you with the understanding that your gliding is an important moment. It resonates hard with my own brief experience of travelling after high school, experimenting with identity as I floated haphazardly between volunteer gigs across Europe.

Most telling of all is that *Sable* is happy to let you wrap things up on your own terms, whenever you feel ready. This isn't a game that wants you to rinse it of content – rather, you're free to return to your clan whenever your Sable feels she's found the mask that's right for her. It's a game about the joy of self-discovery, encouraging you to reflect during those long desert rides, best summed up in a tear-jerking line from one of your clanmates at the very beginning of your journey.

"Try to have fun. There's a lot to be said about ritual and independence and all of that out there, but the world's an easier place if you put joy first." ■



PC PowerPlay GAME OF THE YEAR 2021

VALHEIM

Lauren Morton: The week *Valheim* launched, I scoffed, "Do we really need another Early Access crafting survival game?" Whether or not we needed one, the appetite I and all of my friends developed for scarfing down over 100 hours within a month suggested we very much wanted one.

On paper, *Valheim* is like any other crafting survival game. You begin your adventure by picking up rocks and sticks, slapping together a crude stone axe, and then chopping down every tree in sight. In practice, it's full of twists. The building system with supports and structural integrity challenged me to finally think about base building as a technical puzzle instead of just an aesthetic one. The food system that required me to think about boosting my health and stamina convinced me that I should spare a thought for cooking after I couldn't be bothered in any other game. Small touches like needing to touch a resource before discovering what I could craft with it made for a bit of extra delight.

Ultimately, the fact that all my friends wanted to spend countless late nights together planning some grand longboat expedition across a sea we'd yet to cross or into the swamps was what I loved about *Valheim*. Millions of people spending two months absorbed in an Early Access game made by a tiny studio is the kind of magic I adore about PC gaming.

Christopher Livingston: It says something about the size and scope of *Valheim* that I played for 20 hours before I realised that I'm on an island, not a continent. I'm on a tiny tutorial island and there's a huge world out there full of other stuff I haven't even seen yet. The day I left my island, bringing everything I could carry onto my little wooden raft and setting off across a vast ocean, headed for the unknown, was a thrilling adventure. And now every trip I make into the unknown in *Valheim* feels like a bold adventure with that same awe and wonder I felt on my first shaky voyage.

THE KIND OF MAGIC I ADORE ABOUT PC GAMING

Jacob Ridley: Like Lauren, I was done with survival games when *Valheim* rolled around. Well, I thought I was. Tune in a month or so later and I've played over 100 hours of *Valheim* and counting. There was just something so accessible about the look and feel of *Valheim*'s world, and the fact there is always something to keep you occupied, be that building or exploration.

I spent tens of hours building a manor house on top of a precariously placed rock, in one of the most inhospitable biomes in *Valheim* – racing to have the highest tower against a friend who set up on the next rock over. I sailed across the ocean to find the best sources of ore to smelt to build up towns and villages spanning islands. I set up trade routes with friends in other areas of the world, and created bridges and canals, partially changing the face of the landscape.

Truly the most fun I've had in a game all year, and it offered a great opportunity to share that enjoyment with my friends as we explored together. ■

Intro

ZOMBIE

Games

YOUR GUIDE TO THE LATEST PC GAMES.

GAMES THIS ISSUE

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078 AGE OF EMPIRES IV

SCORING SYSTEM

PCPP scores its games on a 1 to 100 scale. The higher, the better – though 100 is by no means a "perfect" game. We're not convinced such a thing exists, so consider a 100 a masterpiece of PC gaming, despite its inevitable flaws. A 50 is a decidedly average game; one that doesn't excel in any particular area, without being an affront to our senses – the ultimate in mediocrity. Below this, you'll start to find the games our reviewers suffered an aneurysm getting through; above it, the titles truly worth your time and money. And remember: a score is only a vague indication of quality. Always read the full review for the definitive opinion!

POWERED BY
REPUBLIC OF GAMERS

DUTY STALLS

Despite some impressive moments, **CALL OF DUTY: VANGUARD** struggles to stand out

By Rick Lane

Once again, *Call of Duty* spins its wheel of war, and for the sixth time in the series' history, the needle has landed on 'World War the Second'. *Call of Duty* has always been most comfortable booting Hitler right in the Panzerschrecks, nestled cosily in the history of the victors, safe in the knowledge that the baddies really were bad. But it's also the most difficult setting from which to build something new. There are only so many World War II battles, after all, and *Call of Duty* has covered them exhaustively over the years.

It's a problem that *Vanguard* fails to resolve, which is a shame because there are hints of more interesting ideas amid the game's familiar sights and sounds. But in the end *Vanguard* submits to expectation. There are certain things a *Call of Duty* game must be, and Sledgehammer ticks those boxes in dependable but unadventurous fashion.

The campaign is most indicative of the gulf between *Vanguard*'s ideas and execution. The story revolves around a group of special forces agents plucked from different theatres of the war, who are dispatched on a secret mission to Berlin in the final days of the Reich. The action commences with a raid on a German train while fires from the Russian advance rage in the distance. This rolls seamlessly into an assault on a submarine dock, where the group learns about a secret Nazi operation known as Project Phoenix.

OPSY DAISY

It's an interesting setup for a WWII shooter. The prospect of following this group of renegades through infernal Berlin is tantalising, and I was keen to see what tale Sledgehammer would spin in this relatively unexplored area of the war. But this isn't what happens. Immediately after the raid, your group of agents are captured by the Nazis, and spend most of the remaining campaign imprisoned beneath some gloomy Nazi administration building. While our heroes sit around sucking their teeth, the campaign hops between flashbacks that individually focus on each member of the team's experiences during the war.

In other words, what initially seems like a different take on the Second World War turns out to be just another playable highlight reel of the conflict. Admittedly, Sledgehammer tries to put twists on the more familiar encounters. The obligatory D-Day mission involves parachuting into treacherous Normandy woodland before assaulting a clifftop bunker from behind to facilitate the D-Day landings, while the Pacific themed Numa Numa Trail sees you join forces with an all-black American unit, dodging Japanese deathtraps and snipers in preparation for a spectacular assault on an airfield. The highlight of the campaign is Stalingrad Summer, which gives you a taste of life in WWII's lynchpin city prior to the Nazi assault, before all hell breaks loose in the campaign's standout action sequence.

Sledgehammer tries to put twists on the more familiar encounters

Not all the missions are so well thought out. The later missions set in north Africa are spectacular, and lent a sense of fun by your team of cocky Australian saboteurs. But ultimately it's a derivative drive through the desert. The biggest letdown is the Battle of Midway, where breath-taking scenes of aerial combat are undermined by *Call of Duty*'s refusal to cede control of the flightstick, constantly pushing you toward the next objective rather than giving you a chance to enjoy the fighting.

TEAM PLAYERS

The campaign's broader issue, though, is it offers little opportunity to experience your spec-ops team as a *team*. It's a shame because, for once, the characters are a likeable bunch. The writing may be heavily splashed with patriotic pathos, and the fact the game uses quotes from its own characters for the death-screens is painfully pretentious. But the general rapport of the squad is engaging, while characters like Lucas the Australian saboteur, and Polina the Russian sniper, are given enough depth to make you care about them.

Sadly, there are only two missions in which the squad actually work together. The rest of the time, they're incarcerated in a prison cell, while Dominic Monaghan's creepy Nazi administrator tries his best to conceal *Vanguard*'s almost complete lack of plot. The cutscenes are long and meandering, and it all leads up to an underwhelming final mission.

As the campaign struggles to make the best of its ideas, multiplayer is more progressive, bringing a couple of broad changes and more bespoke new features that make a small but noticeable difference from previous years. Foremost among the new additions are more destructable

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Activision's annual cash-cow, this time with a World War II theme.

DEVELOPER
Sledgehammer Games

PUBLISHER
Activision

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 5 3600, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2080 Super, 32 GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
callofduty.com

WAR NEVER CHANGES

Call of Duty	★★★★★★★★☆☆
Call of Duty: United Offensive	★★★★★★★★★☆
Call of Duty 2	★★★★★★★★★★
Call of Duty 3 (not on PC)	☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆
Call of Duty: World at War	★★★★★☆☆☆☆☆
Call of Duty: WWII	★★★★★★★☆☆☆
Call of Duty: Vanguard	★★★★★★☆☆☆☆

Call of Duty: Vanguard

Better wrap up warm or you'll catch your death.

Killstreaks are as spectacular and unbalanced as ever.

LEFT: A sprinkling of destruction tech means some walls and doors deteriorate as the match progresses.

BELOW LEFT: The Vanguard squad are a surprisingly likeable bunch, but you don't spend much time with them together.

CoD's awkward relationship with vehicles continues in the Battle of Midway Mission.

maps. While we're not talking *Battlefield* levels of destruction, certain walls and windows can be shattered to alter the flow of maps, and environments are subject to a more cosmetic 'dirtying' over time. It gives the maps a satisfying sense of progression, and it's fun to see the mess left behind by a half-dozen bombing-run killstreaks.

Less notable but arguably more significant is the introduction of Combat Pacing, which essentially lets you select the rough player-count for each mode. There are three pacing levels: Tactical, Assault, and Blitz. Tactical keeps the player count low, resulting in an almost *Counter-Strike* feel. Blitz, meanwhile, can have anywhere between 16 and 48 players, which means intense action and killstreaks by the bucketload. Personally, I liked letting the game cycle through the different tiers. It made for a good showcase of how varied *Vanguard*'s multiplayer can be.

Modes-wise, *Vanguard* hinges heavily around classic scenarios like Team Deathmatch and Domination, while there's a new version of *Modern Warfare*'s Gunfight mode called Champion Kill. This sees players square off in teams of two or three in small-scale rounds. You all start off with the same loadout, but cash you earn by winning lets you upgrade your weapons and equipment, meaning fights gradually diversify as they progress.

For me, though, the highlight of *Vanguard*'s multiplayer is Patrol. This is a capture and hold-scenario similar to Domination, but there is only one control point that moves randomly around the map. This makes it far more dynamic than traditional Domination, as the team in control must constantly adjust its defence to counter new sightlines or angles of attack. It's a fun, frenetic mode that balances teamwork with your ability to react, although it's best played on Tactical or Assault Pacing. Blitz turns Patrol into a chaotic pile-on.

SMITHING THE POINT

All considered, I like *Vanguard*'s multiplayer, but there's nothing here that makes it a must-buy. Like the campaign, it seems to struggle with the World War II setting. There's nothing as interesting as *Call of Duty: WWII*'s War mode, for example, while the whole gunsmithing element of the game feels entirely out-of-place with World War II era-weaponry. Indeed, one thing I would like from *Vanguard* is a 'no attachments' mode, where you play exclusively with the default weapons – scopes and stocks be damned.

Modes-wise, *Vanguard* hinges heavily around classic scenarios

I suppose I'm now obliged to talk about Zombies. Cards on the table, I've never really cared for *CoD*'s Zombies mode, and *Vanguard*'s version does little to convince me that I'm missing out. Der Anfang centres around a hub in Stalingrad, from which you can access portals that transport you to different places like Paris or the Pacific, where you must complete one of three objective types. One sees you collecting runes to disable a series of magic obelisks, another involves protecting a floating orb as it travels around the map, and the third is a 'kill zombies until the timer runs out' affair.

Completing these missions earns you Cursed Hearts. These are spent at an altar on various powers that can combine with your weapons and abilities in, well, I was going to say 'interesting ways' but frankly that's pushing it. For example, I combined the combat shotgun with an ability that reloads your gun for you on a critical hit. The result of this was I hardly had to reload again, letting me mow zombies down easily. More powerful versions of these abilities become available to buy as the zombie horde grows, so the combat scales in intensity as you progress. But with only three mission types and three zombie types, the hamster-wheel grind quickly emerges.

STORMY WEATHER

There is one last issue relating to this year's *Call of Duty* that must be addressed. Sledgehammer's game releases off the back of truly horrific allegations of discrimination and sexual harassment at Activision Blizzard has led to the state of California suing the company. It's the most egregious example yet of the game industry's endemic mistreatment of women. Sledgehammer, for its part, addressed the allegations against its parent company in the run-up to release, and there are ongoing efforts by the ABK Workers' Alliance to improve the culture of the company.

It's difficult to address this topic in a sufficiently nuanced fashion within the scope of a review. Our sister PC Gamer site has covered the story extensively as it has unfolded and will continue to do so. Nonetheless, during the process of review the allegations were never far from my mind, and although I wouldn't want to punish the work of Sledgehammer for actions taken by people elsewhere in Activision Blizzard, I also find it hard not to be frustrated at the prospect of who might profit from the positive things I've said about *Vanguard*, and how that feeds, however slightly or indirectly, into facilitating a culture of harassment and abuse.

I hope there is no need to make such clarifications in the future, because there are glimpses of ingenuity within *Vanguard*, and perhaps Sledgehammer can take those ideas and run further on its next outing with the series. This time around though, my feelings are largely indifferent. The singleplayer has a couple of great missions, and the multiplayer has a couple of good modes. But on the whole, *Vanguard* is a war we've seen before. ■

HAMMERING IT HOME

Sledgehammer's decade with Call of Duty

CALL OF DUTY: ADVANCED WARFARE 2014

CALL OF DUTY: MODERN WARFARE 2019
Assisting Infinity Ward

CALL OF DUTY: VANGUARD 2021

CALL OF DUTY 3 2011
Co-developed with Infinity Ward

CALL OF DUTY: WWII 2017

CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS COLD WAR 2020
Assisting Treyarch

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Multiplayer is as good as ever, but the campaign and Zombies mode fail to capitalise on what could be interesting ideas.

60

BIGGER FIELD

BATTLEFIELD 2042 refocuses the series on its founding principle: being huge

By Tyler Wilde

I wasn't sure whether or not *Battlefield 2042*'s randomly-appearing tornadoes could pick up vehicles until my squad's ATV was inhaled by one. As we tumbled skyward, I had to make a choice: ride it out in the gunner's seat or eject? I bailed. Our driver remained at the wheel, trusting that 'all-terrain' included the sky. Two seconds later the vehicle fell into a field like a bomb and incinerated him.

Even after two decades of sanding and streamlining, *Battlefield* can still surprise. The modern FPS scene is now stacked with big maps and whimsical vehicle physics, but *Battlefield* remains distinct from the milsims and battle royale games that have encircled it. With *Battlefield 2042*, DICE stands its ground as the king of military shenanigans more convincingly than it did with *Battlefield V*, ditching the singleplayer campaign to focus on the two pillars of the series: objective-based multiplayer and scale.

What was a 64-player game for 20 years is now a 128-player game

ROOM TO STRETCH

What was a 64-player game for 20 years is now a 128-player game, with proportionally bigger maps, putting *Battlefield* back in the category of games that push technical boundaries. The increased acreage isn't an across-the-board improvement to the *Battlefield* experience, but if it's wrong to make a game bigger and more technically complicated without designing for all the possible consequences, then I don't want to be right.

The commitment to scale does come with regressions, such as cruder, less-destructible buildings, and large tracts of mud, grass, and sand between landmarks. The new vehicle call-in system makes it hard to become truly stranded – on a cooldown, you can ask what I presume is an orbital parking garage to drop a vehicle for you – but sometimes I like going for a walk, anyway. Squad and vehicle spawning took a lot of the cardio out of the *Battlefield* series, and the downtime gives me a chance to take in the scale of the battle around me and feel some of the awe I felt when I first played *Battlefield 1942*.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A large-scale multiplayer shooter focused on vehicle combat and point capture

DEVELOPER
DICE

PUBLISHER
EA

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i5-9600K, 16GB RAM, Nvidia RTX 2070 Super

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

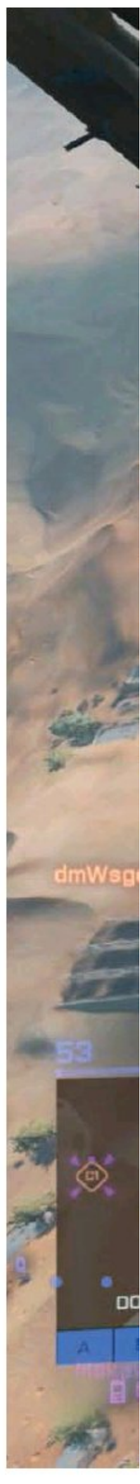
LINK
bit.ly/2ZjwUEC

There is some trend-chasing in *Battlefield 2042*, but it's handled better than it was last time, when the Firestorm battle royale mode was airdropped into *Battlefield V* after launch. From the start, *Battlefield 2042* includes Hazard Zone, a more coherent mode for four-player squads. It's similar to *Hunt: Showdown* in that multiple teams enter a map, compete to grab a thematic MacGuffin, and then try to get out alive, but the stakes are lower and there's 100% less bayou. It's plain by comparison, but once the tornado squad and I got the hang of seeking out respawn and vehicle call-ins and keeping each other alive with our specialist abilities – another of *Battlefield 2042*'s modernisations – we started to get into fun protracted battles with other squads, reviving and re-reviving each other as they did the same.

BACK TO BASICS

To the left of Hazard Zone on the main menu, All-Out Warfare encompasses *Battlefield*'s standard big-team warfare: the classic Conquest point capture mode and Breakthrough, the simple but fun attack-and-defend mode. And on the right side of the menu is Portal, a tool for creating and hosting custom game modes. It's no replacement for modding and custom dedicated servers, but those ships have sailed for big multiplayer games. Even *Left 4 Dead* successor *Back 4 Blood* is without mod support. As a compromise, Portal is a powerful middle ground that can even be used to whip up co-op experiences with friends and play *Battlefield 1942* Conquest on Battle of the Bulge. I hope every big live service shooter steals it and uses it.

There's a lot to experience in *Battlefield 2042*, but it feels like Swedish minimalism has won a victory here. Outside of the granular accessibility and graphics settings (it runs decently for a *Battlefield* game



ZONES VS BAYOUS VS EASTERN EUROPE

How Hazard Zone's premise compares to other modes

HAZARD ZONE

Collect cookbook-sized data drives from US and Russian spy satellites as they fall out of low orbit.

Verdict: 3/10

"The Cold War if everyone were stupider"

HUNT: SHOWDOWN

Track supernatural monsters across big, creepy bayous and banish them back to Hell... if you're lucky.

Verdict: 9/10

"There's a character named John Hunter"

ESCAPE FROM TARKOV

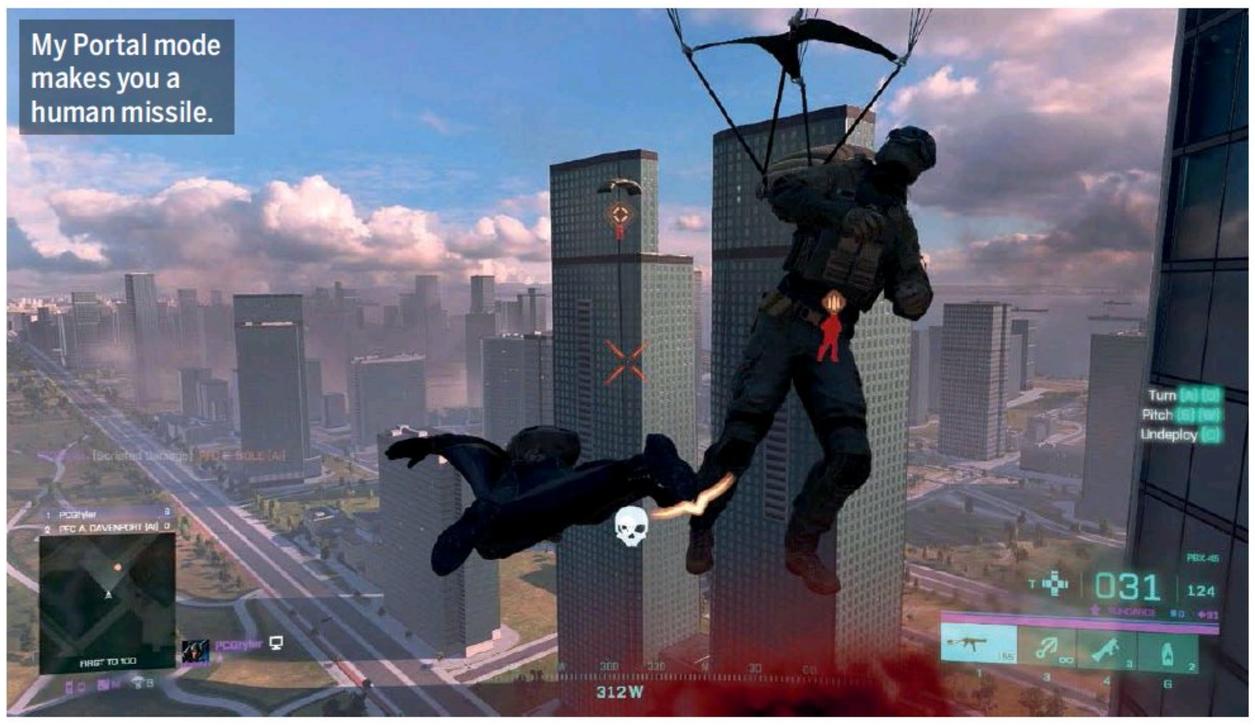
Private military companies and gangs of scavengers clash in a blockaded Eastern European city.

Verdict: 7/10

"I've been reading the wiki for three hours"

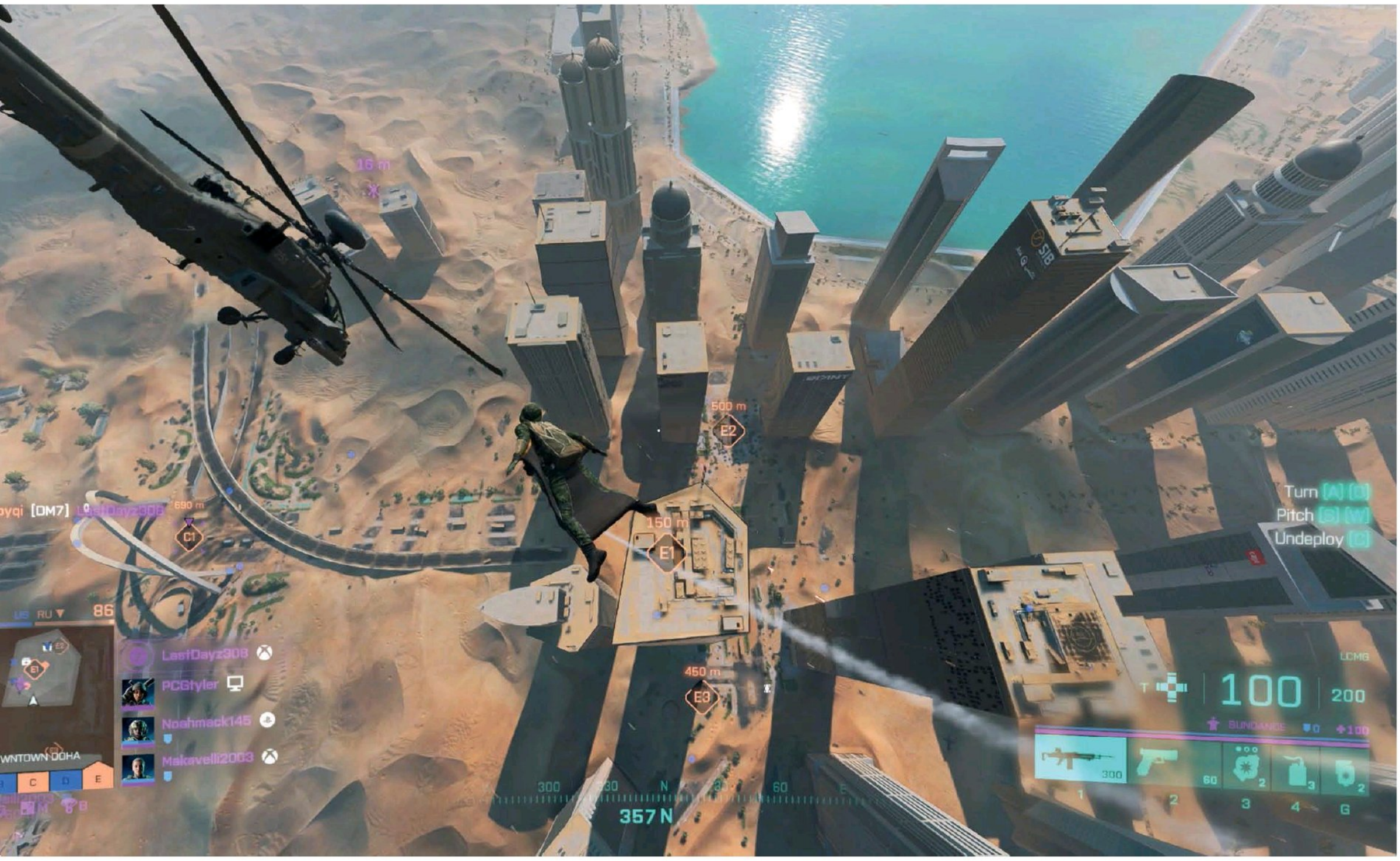
The bigger maps mean more room to maneuver.

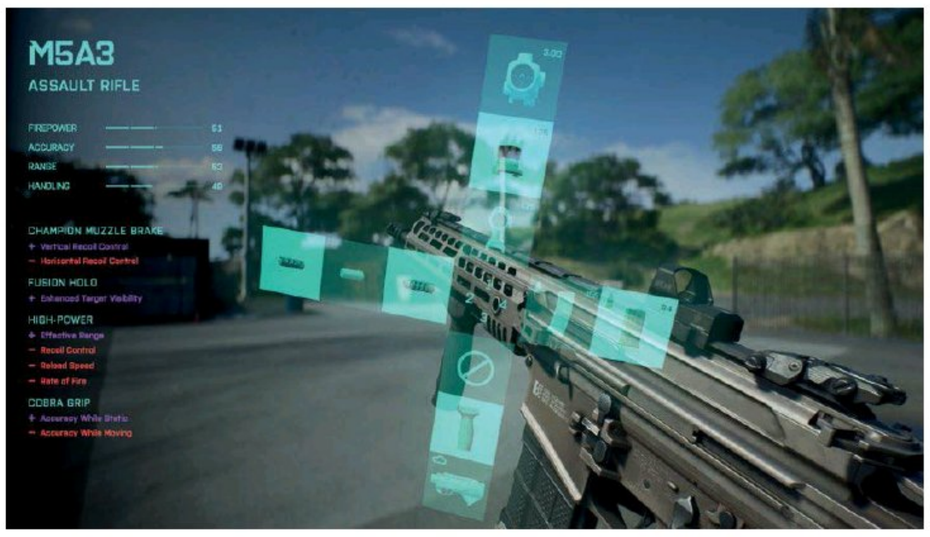
My Portal mode makes you a human missile.



LEFT: Hazard Zone's crashed satellites have a light *Fallout* vibe.

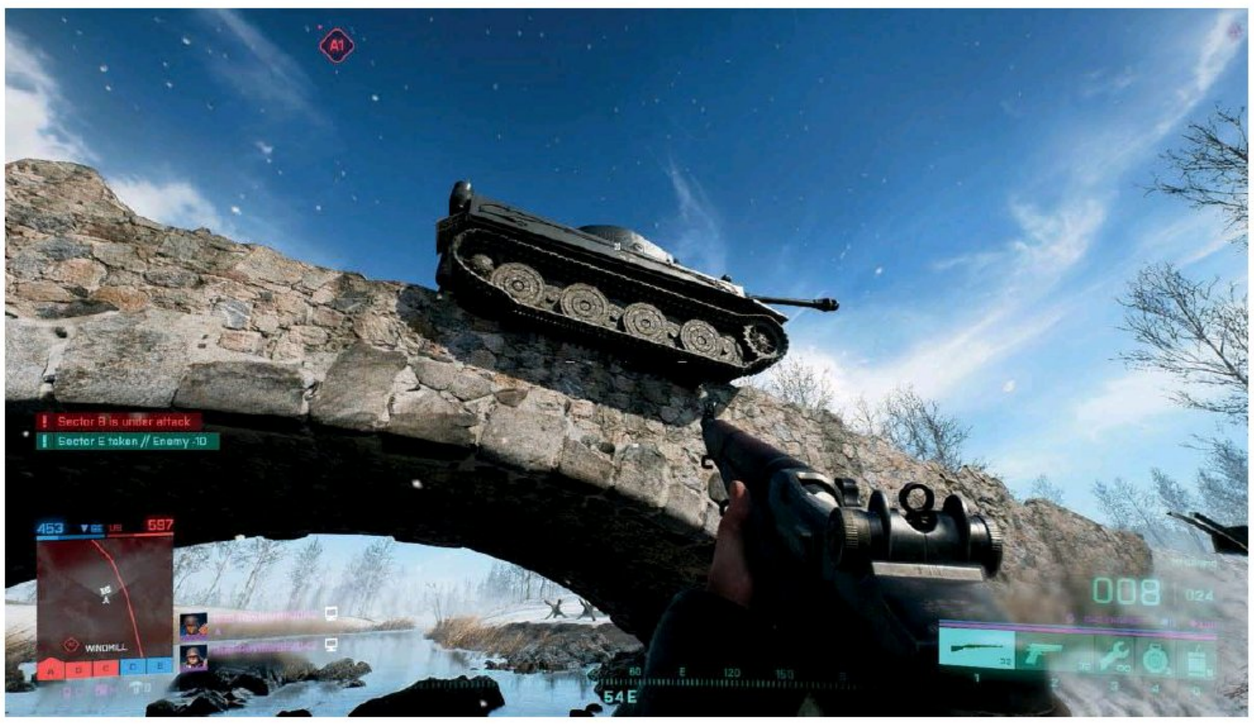
BELOW: This is just a corner of the map.





RIGHT: The old *Battlefield Bad Company 2* maps now feel tiny by comparison.

FAR RIGHT: I got a tank stuck in Portal's version of Battle of the Bulge.



on my RTX 2070 Super), the menus feel sparse. There are fewer unlockable guns than usual, simpler progression systems, and no battle pass. The only extra EA is selling right now is a year-long pass that promises four new specialists who'll bring exclusive gadgets and perks to the battle. The menu and microtransaction hygiene is largely a good thing, although there are some annoying and disappointing omissions at launch. There's no stats page, for instance, and you can't tell if a teammate is coming to revive you when you're down.

I can easily spend an entire match duking it out in a single sector

GET TO THE POINTS

One thing hasn't changed: in Conquest, two 64-player teams compete to capture and hold control points the same way they have for 20 years, by standing near a flag until it changes colour. However, points can now appear in clusters of two or three, forming sectors that give some structure to the giant maps. I can easily spend an entire match duking it out in a single sector. Entirely separate war stories were playing out over at the rocket launch pad while I was repeatedly dying on a grassy hill, for all I knew. It's easy to lose track of the larger battle as I focus on one or two points, but that sense of being a small variable in a big, complex fight is part of what makes it enchanting.

Battlefield 2042 is best played in a four-person squad in a Discord voice channel (there's no built-in VOIP at launch), which I wouldn't have said about *Battlefield V*. We always seemed to end up doing different things in that game, but *2042*'s new specialist gadgets encourage teamwork by making us more useful to each other. So far, I like to bless my crew with intel from a spotting drone and transparent fortifications to hide behind. The decoupling of class from loadout also makes it easier to coordinate, because no one has to give up their favourite gun to heal, or spot, or carry rockets. The ammo capacity tuning feels just right, too, such that putting an ammo crate in one of my loadouts is useful enough to not feel like a downgrade next to toys like rocket launchers and AA missiles.

There are great characters and gadgets for solo players, too. Sundance's wingsuit is a blast. They can leap out of helicopters or off of skyscrapers and manoeuvre in the air like a manta ray. It's not as satisfying as skiing in the *Tribes* games, which is essentially using a bug to accelerate forever, but if you master the physics of it you can keep them airborne for a long time. Mackay's grappling hook is useful in fewer situations, but likewise increases the intrinsic fun of moving around skilfully. I once chucked a smoke grenade over a shipping crate, zipped onto the top of it, and then leapt into my smoke plume to emerge like a stage magician, surprising a squad that could've sworn I'd been much further away just a few seconds ago.

BLASTS FROM THE PAST

Some of my complaints about *Battlefield 2042* can be addressed in Portal. It's a *Battlefield* potpourri that features official recreations of *Battlefield 1942* Conquest, *Battlefield: Bad Company 2* Rush, and *Battlefield 3* Conquest, with two remade maps per game and most of their guns, vehicles, and gadgets, as well as free-for-all and team deathmatch modes, plus servers running custom, player-made modes that mix and match maps, weaponry, and rules. You can turn off squad and vehicle spawning, for example, or design an asymmetrical mode in which a team of *Battlefield 2042* soldiers fight *Battlefield 1942* soldiers, or one team is full of aggressive, knife-wielding bots that swarm toward the human players like zombies.

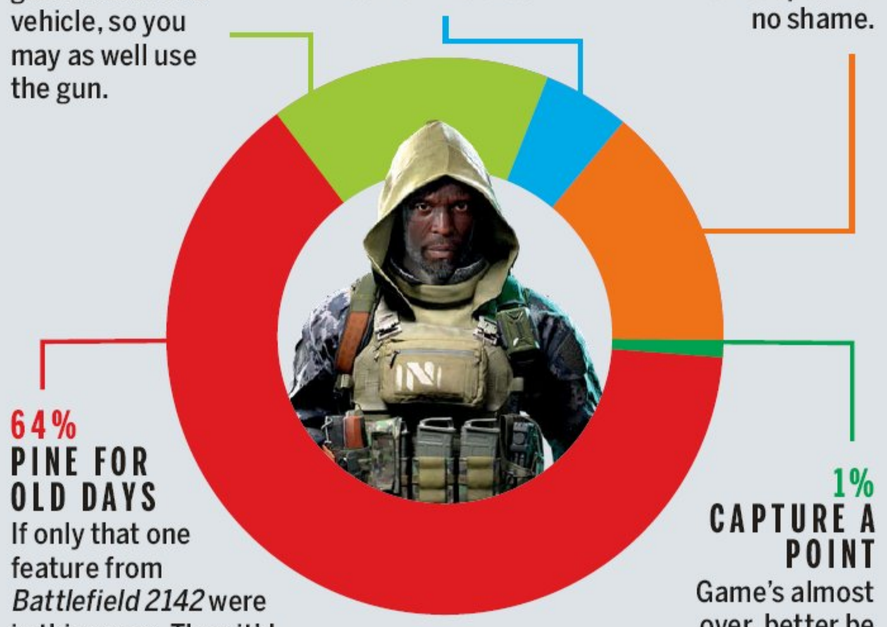
I'm frustrated by Portal restrictions that feel unnecessary, or like they exist to stop me from making a mode that's broken or unfun (I'll decide what the boundaries of FPS design are, thank you very much). For example, the visual logic editor, which opens many more possibilities than the built-in toggles and sliders, can only be used to modify free-for-all and team deathmatch modes, which don't contain any vehicles. You can't set up a mode that spawns ten players into jets for a free-for-all dogfight.

With the logic editor, I did manage to create crude hit boxes so that players can kill each other by colliding in the air, and then set it up so that they teleport back into the sky if they get too low. If they opt to use a sniper rifle from rooftops instead of being human missiles, they get on-screen messages declaring that they've violated the way of Bushido. So, Portal is powerful. I hope DICE loosens up some of the restrictions. If I can make a mode that crashes my PC, I'll consider that a feature, not a bug.

Taken together, All-Out Warfare, Hazard Zone, and Portal are a substantial videogame warfare toybox, enough to get me to reluctantly accept a newfangled scoreboard that focuses on squads more than individuals. The specialist abilities and Portal custom modes introduce new ways to play *Battlefield*, while some of the old ways don't feel the same, for better and worse. It's a modern *Battlefield* I want to get my *Forza Horizon* and *Rainbow Six Siege*-playing friends into. That might not happen until EA makes *Battlefield 2042* available on Xbox Game Pass, if it ever does, but that's fine. I'm happy to spend months trying to break the game with Portal's logic editor so that I have a library of nearly unplayable mutant FPS modes ready to go. ■

OLD-SCHOOL TACTICS

How to play* Battlefield *like a series veteran


16%
SHOOT AT NOTHING
You got into the gunner seat of a vehicle, so you may as well use the gun.
5%
YELL AT PILOTS
What were they thinking when they didn't dodge all those lock-on missiles?
14%
LIE ON HILLS
Have a lie down with a big rifle, a 10x scope, and no shame.
64%
PINE FOR OLD DAYS
If only that one feature from *Battlefield 2142* were in this game. Then it'd be good!
1%
CAPTURE A POINT
Game's almost over, better be seen near a flag!

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Battlefield 2042 **makes gusty changes to a series that needed them, and Portal fills it with possibilities for creativity.**

80

BRUTE FORCE

HALO INFINITE comes frustratingly close to greatness

By Nat Clayton

Does an open world work for *Halo*? Since it's announcement, that question is one that's been constantly asked of *Halo Infinite*. Six years after *Halo 5* left the series on a sour note, 343 Industries has dusted off the Master Chief's armour for a throwback to Bungie's original – nostalgic for a time when *Halo* was just a big green man, his blue, holographic girlfriend, and a wide open ring full of possibilities to explore.

What this results in is a game that could be a true return to form for Master Chief – but I'm just not convinced *Halo* really needed to be an open world.

Let's make one thing clear though: this is some damn fine *Halo*. Having played *Halo 3* with the lads every weekend for the last year, *Infinite* comes as a breath of fresh air. Running and gunning in *Halo* has never felt this good, Master Chief moving with a real heft even as he slides and mantles his way across ancient alien amphitheatres.

Halo Infinite's multiplayer gave us a taste of this, launching a month ahead of the story proper. But where the game's arsenal feels a little flat in team slayer, the campaign helps even the flimsiest weapons shine thanks to a menagerie of alien baddies with unique behaviours. Weapon types have never felt more important, especially on harder difficulties (I played through on Heroic), and juggling between bursting shields with plasma, busting skulls with kinetic, and stunning foes with shock weapons becomes crucial. It helps that every weapon feels great, snapping and popping and busting with satisfying sounds.

That grapple is also essential for exploring *Halo Infinite's* open world

Infinite's firefights feel electric, hectic, a constant grab-bag of finding the next best tool (even if that means tossing a nearby plasma barrel at a pack of Grunts). But none of this comes close to the sheer absolute thrill of the grappling hook. *Infinite* immediately hands you a length of rope with which to fling yourself around Zeta Halo with.

At first you're pulling yourself out of enemy fire and grappling vehicles, but a few upgrades will turn it into a deadly electric wire that shocks unshielded baddies and lets you slam-dunk entire packs of foes with a tap of the melee button. This comes at the cost of making the rest of the equipment feel a little redundant, mind. Changing equipment on the fly is a hassle and, honestly, you're always best served with the utility of a simple hooked rope.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An open world sequel in the long-running shooter series

DEVELOPER
343 Industries

PUBLISHER
Xbox Game Studios

REVIEWED ON
RTX 2070 SUPER, Ryzen 5 3600, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
bit.ly/3DNxecH

RING ROAD

That grapple is also essential for exploring *Halo Infinite's* open world. Introduced after two more traditionally linear missions, *Infinite* introduces you to the open-ish plains of Zeta Halo. But while your AI sidekick (more on her later) immediately floods your map screen with icons, don't be fooled. This isn't *Far Cry: Ringworld* – in fact, you'll find the open world to be surprisingly small.

Instead, these activities feel more like diversions between main story missions. While heading to your next plot beat you might find a squad of marines to rescue, or an FOB (bases from which to fast travel and summon weapons and vehicles) to capture. They're fun, but incidental – and while the larger strongholds provide a more structured challenge, I rarely felt the pull to break off from the main path to devote time to them.

See, Halo doesn't lend itself well to a drip-feed of unlocks. Main story missions are tightly controlled and rarely let you just rock up with a tank. Powerful weapon variations can be acquired by taking down high-value targets in the open world, but levels are constantly throwing completely different challenges in your face. Why cling onto a long-range Sidekick variant when a mission just tossed you into a pit of beefed-up Elites?

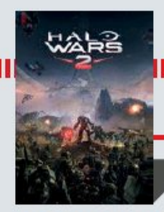
There's perhaps one mission that makes use of the open world structure, a mid-game level that tasks you with crossing kilometres of space to infiltrate Forerunner beacons

REQUIRED READING *Catch up on your* Halo *before stepping into* Infinite

HALO: COMBAT EVOLVED
2001
Infinite's forest valleys are a throwback to the series' debut, a simpler time. While linear, it's clear to see how you could push these expansive levels into an open world.

HALO 4
2012
After a full trilogy and two spin-offs, Bungie hands the series over to new studio 343. The universe is reset with a new cast, a new ship, and the sense that not all is well with Chief's holo girlfriend Cortana.

HALO 5: GUARDIANS
2015
The last we saw of the Chief, *Halo 5* ends with Cortana going full fash, taking over the galaxy with an army of ancient robots. There's also a whole 'has the Chief gone rogue' arc that doesn't really go anywhere.



HALO WARS 2
2017
Infinite largely hand-waves all that AI apocalypse nonsense and reintroduces the Banished, a successor faction of Covenant baddies pulled from Creative Assembly's RTS spin-off sequel.

All aboard the party bus!

LEFT: The banshee might be hot garbage, but it's the best way to get around.

BELOW: What's better than this, just guys being dudes?

RIGHT: Rings within rings within rings.

BELOW: The Mangler does exactly what it says on the tin.

fiercely held by Banished forces. It's here where all those toys you may have unlocked can finally come into play – one final effort at an open world *Halo*, before *Infinite* sort of gives up on pretending to be an open world entirely in its final hours.

HALO FINITE

But *Halo Infinite* is still an open world, and even when it guns back into a more traditional pace in the latter half, it can't escape that structure. The Forerunners must have loved their trip to Seattle, because *Infinite's* world is all minor variations on the same Pacific Northwest environment. Because the story needs to take place within this small chunk of Zeta Halo (less an expansive ringworld and more a modest national park), missions can't break off into desert vistas, frozen valleys, or dense urban warzones. Enter a mission, and you're guaranteed it'll be some combination of pine forests and pristine Forerunner structures.

Don't get me wrong, it's a beautiful forest. *Infinite* is a gorgeous game, omitting the overdesigned characters and environments of 343's previous games to create a well-considered evolution of Bungie's visuals. Forests are thriving with wildlife, grass sways in the breeze, and Forerunner structures feel suitably imposing. That ring on the horizon is physical, interacting with the sun and casting long shadows across itself.

But that familiarity robs missions of a unique identity, and after finishing the game the only one that really stands in my memory is a late-game level in a particularly fun Banished facility. The open world's lush forests, valleys and marine-rescue setup may strongly evoke Halo (the mission) from *Halo* (the 2001 series debut), but none of the main missions stand up against the timeless design of The Silent Cartographer, or even *Halo 3's* less fondly remembered meat labyrinth, Cortana (er, again, the mission).

In the moment, level and encounter design is great. 343 is so careful to make sure fights never feel overly familiar, always throwing new pain points into the mix. There are even moments that call back to highs from earlier games – fending off Sentinels from a painfully slow gondola, tearing down valleys in a Scorpion tank. But there's nothing as spectacular as the time *Halo 3* dropped two building-sized Scarabs on top of you and told you to just figure it out.

Instead, *Infinite* has boss fights, and they're decent, if a little uninspired. But there's a special place in hell for a pair of Brutes you're forced to face in an open ditch – one riding a souped-up Chopper while the other nukes you with artillery fire, summoning extra baddies when either is defeated.

Unless you're clued in on *Halo 5* the story is a hot confusing mess

THE LOUD CARTOGRAPHER

But the biggest frustration is that, for as much as *Infinite* has been earmarked as a throwback to the series' roots, 343 can't shed 20 years of lore baggage. It's frustrating because at the root of the game is the relationship between Chief, the UNSC pilot who rescues him at the game's opening, and The Weapon – an AI modelled after Cortana after Cortana went all galactic dictator-god at the end of *Halo 5*.

At its heart, this dynamic works! Chief is starting to feel tired after all these years of being a video game hero, but his need for heroics and duty creates a wonderful tension with a pilot who is at the absolute end of his tether. The Weapon often risks coming across as gratingly naïve, but she feels like a knowing throwback to the first *Halo's* version of Cortana – a friendly voice to accompany you through ancient ruins and apocalyptic schemes. A family can be a big green man, his blue holographic partner, and a nervous wreck at the helm of a 130-ton dropship, and that's okay.

They're a good foundation for a story, but unless you're clued in on *Halo 5* the story is a hot confusing mess. The Banished simply aren't interesting baddies, a straight reskin of the Covenant only redder and meaner, but they soon share the stage with 343's favourite trope. *Halo's* established ancient aliens, the Forerunners, aren't mysterious anymore, so we're introduced to a new ancient alien who has a grudge against the Forerunners and, by proxy, humanity.

Any mystery *Halo* used to hold has been lost under a deluge of proper nouns and thousand-year machinations, and keeping track of it is exhausting. But when all is said and done, the story isn't even really about the Banished, or the Harbinger, or the Endless. It's about Master Chief and Cortana, a relationship that even with the latter's absence, drives everything our big green man does throughout the game. Truth be told, it's not a relationship that's ever worked for me.

FIGHT FINISHED

Infinite wants to kick off a new era of *Halo* by asking why we fell in love with it in the first place. Exploring the open world after wrapping the campaign is a joy, exploring nooks and crannies for secrets, basking in the alien beauty of watching the sun set behind the ring and rising on the other side of it moments later. Wrapping up all those side missions I skipped and admitting that they probably were best left until now, when I'm done with the story but still hankering for some good fights.

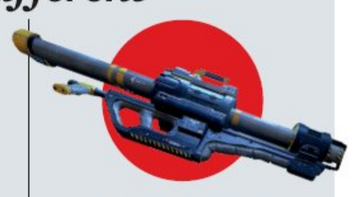
For lapsed fans of the Bungie games like me, *Halo Infinite* is a strong return to form, and in the heat of battle it's the best running and gunning the series has ever had. It's painfully easy to imagine a world where *Infinite* could have easily been one of my favourite entries to date. But between a redundant open world and a story that can't shed the series' baggage, *Halo Infinite's* campaign falls just shy of being a great Halo. ■

CUSTOM HARDWARE

The weapons you know, but different

MA40 LONGSHOT
The basic assault rifle is good. It's very good. But this version packs a meaner punch at a longer range and is a must-have for any Spartan.

UNBOUND PLASMA PISTOL
Even the humble plasma pistol gets a souped up variant, charging faster and unleashing a shotgun spread of devastating bolts.



M41 TRACKER
Rockets are hard to come by, so make sure you never waste another shot with a homing variant of the trusty rocket launcher pulled out of *Halo 2*.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

***Infinite* can't deliver on its open world ambitions, but it's a solid entry with the best shooting the series has ever seen.**

78

BRUTAL BALLET

Think with your fists in FIGHTS IN TIGHT SPACES

By Dashiell Wood

Smashing a goon's head against the wall before launching his buddy out of a window doesn't sound strategic on paper, but the turn-based combat of *Fights in Tight Spaces* transforms even the simplest enemy encounter into an intricate puzzle where the only solution is your fists. Although its roguelike trappings can detract from the overall experience, these moments where everything comes together in a glorious display of violence always shine through.

Stepping into the well-polished shoes of an international super spy tasked with dismantling criminal syndicates, the basic plot does little more than loosely string together the five separate worlds in which the action occurs. Divided into semi-procedurally generated levels, each world has you fighting through a number of tightly enclosed locations that range from densely packed subway carriages to compact office corridors. The Hollywood influences are clear and it's thrilling to recreate iconic film moments like Casino Royale's opening bathroom brawl.

Despite being rendered in the same charming minimalist style, each world still manages to convey a unique aesthetic to set themselves apart, a fact greatly helped by the huge variety in enemy design and combat ability. While early introductions are limited to basic buffs, like slightly higher health pools, you're soon dealing with enemies armed with guns or the ability to counterattack outside of their turns. It's good that things start off slow, as the combat is deceptively deep and can take a few hours to master. Fights are centred around improvisation, and each turn has you juggling finite energy resources with a hand of cards representing various attacks, dodges, blocks, and moves. Each card carries a specific energy cost and there's lots of strategy in spending your energy efficiently with your available hand. Incoming enemy actions are highlighted to assist your decision making, and you frequently have to choose between either evading a possible attack or landing an extra hit on your adversary. Knowing what's coming next not only lends confrontations an exhilarating cat-and-mouse feel, but also makes it possible to exploit an enemy's future moves to your benefit. It's hugely satisfying using your grapples and attacks to shuffle a group of thugs around so that they end up in the perfect position to all accidentally attack each other.

Each turn has you juggling finite energy resources with a hand of cards

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A turn-based roguelike focused on intense melee combat

DEVELOPER
Ground Shatter

PUBLISHER
Mode 7

REVIEWED ON
Nvidia GTX 970, Intel I5-4460, 32GB Ram

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
fightsintightspaces.com

DECK 'EM

At the end of each turn, a new hand of six cards is drawn at random from the deck, and once every card has been played the deck is reshuffled to start the whole process again. This core loop seems simple at first, but the addition of Combo, a numeric value that rises with every attack and falls with blocking or movement, adds an extra layer of depth to overcome. Combo can be spent on powerful special moves, a system much like the combos found in other fighting games. There are cards which represent several injuries as

TOP: Money can be used to pick up new cards in between levels.

TOP: Some moves require environmental objects to perform.

ABOVE: Ouch.

well, which can appear in your deck and slowly decrease your health if you take too many hits, making a frequent use of dodges and blocks vital for survival. The result is a combat system that is simple enough to be enjoyed from the get-go but also containing more than enough depth to sustain interest across multiple playthroughs.

Whilst the emphasis on repeating runs works well, the same can't be said of some of the game's other roguelike elements. In particular, the bonus objectives that can be completed to earn currency become far too difficult as the game progresses. Completing increasingly tricky levels with very few turns can seem outright impossible, and my successes were often the result of luck rather than skill. Frustratingly, money is used for everything from upgrading cards on the fly to topping up health in between fights, making it essential for victory on higher difficulties. It's by no means a deal breaker, but this slightly haphazard implementation of the in-game economy feels at odds with the exceptionally polished combat and wonderfully clean visuals. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Fights in Tight Spaces **is an excellent turn-based strategy title that shines in spite of some very minor annoyances.**

83

A FIGHT TO REMEMBER

Other strategy games with memorable fighting mechanics

SUPERHOT
Far from slow paced, this FPS where time only moves when you do is both strategic and cinematic.

HITMAN GO
Turning the series' sprawling sandboxes into puzzles, this has you using stealth and taking out guards.

JOHN WICK HEX
Slowing the movie's action set pieces to a crawl, *Hex* challenges you to think like an assassin.

XCOM: CHIMERA SQUAD
This colourful *XCOM* spinoff's breach system was a clever twist on the formula.

CRUISE CONTROL

FORZA HORIZON 5 is more of the same, and that's OK

By Phil Savage

After being airdropped from a cargo plane in an AMG One, I arrive at the festival site to a fanfare. The organisers are delighted – their 'superstar' is finally here – and to celebrate they offer me a choice of starting car. I leave the site and head to my first race in a Corvette Stingray Coupe. This isn't how racing games are supposed to start. I should be battling for wins in some hatchback. Instead, I'm being handed a 500 horsepower supercar.

Forza Horizon 5 doesn't need to do what other racing games would do. It just needs to be a *Forza Horizon* game. It's a series with no serious rival, and as such it feels unchallenged. It's not being forced to reinvent the wheel, and so it's content to just hone and refine – to be the best *Forza Horizon* it can be.

If you have played any previous *Forza Horizon* games you already know what this means. A map filled with more icons than a Ubisoft open world, each denoting a race event, a PR stunt, a rumour about some vintage car, or a series of challenges organised into a handful of stories. As you win races and complete events, you're bombarded with rewards. You earn accolades – mini achievements that act as *Forza Horizon 5*'s career progression system – some of which reward new cars and new phrases to spam in chat. You earn wheelspins that can drop cars, cash and clothes.

The rewards come so thick and fast, that collecting new cars is more about broadening your options than straight progression. You'll likely get an S2 class car – among the fastest – in your first hours. But, thanks to the restrictions present in the seasonal playlist, you're encouraged to chase different makes and models.

The seasonal playlist is the heart of *Forza Horizon 5*'s live service. Each week takes place in a new season and offers a variety of events and challenges, usually with restrictions to class, type, and difficulty. As such, it succeeds by forcing you out of your comfort zone, and making you think about how to overcome the restrictions it presents – giving you reasons to think about your garage and what fits your next goal.

Inevitably as I play, I have a big, dumb grin on my face

MEXICAN WAVE

You'll notice at this point that I've not talked about anything new to *Forza Horizon 5*. There's a reason for that. Yes, there's a new event type – an 'expedition' – used to unlock the outposts that contain different racing disciplines. You go to a new area, complete some objectives and your map fills up with new road, street, dirt or cross country races. Even so, calling this a new feature may be overstating the point. With so many event types already, any slight variation struggles to stand out.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A ridiculous car playground masquerading as an open world racing game

DEVELOPER
Playground Games

PUBLISHER
Xbox Game Studios

REVIEWED ON
RTX 3080Ti, 32GB RAM, Ryzen 7 3700X

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

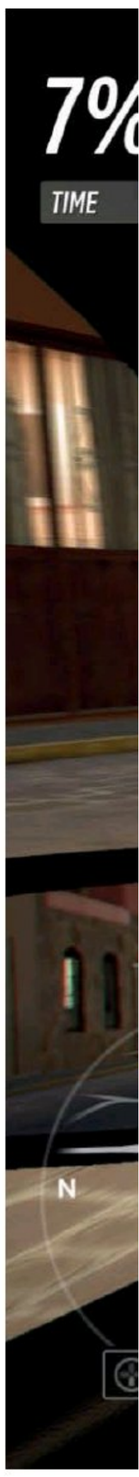
LINK
bit.ly/3FxV0ul

Really, then, the major new feature of *Forza Horizon 5* is, simply, its setting. Mexico is more varied and vibrant than *Forza Horizon 4*'s UK – with rainforests, towns, deserts, and many, many cacti to bash into. The weather is more interesting too.

Throughout, the game's characters reference Mexican culture and history, although it's all filtered through the series' relentless positivity. It's hard to think of its world as a real place, not because it's a pick-and-mix truncation of real locations, but because it exists in a universe where bad things don't happen. Everyone is loving life all of the time – the festival is a constant party, where destruction means skill chains and harsh vibes don't exist.

This is *Forza Horizon*'s whole deal, though, and while I might roll my eyes at the dialogue, I can't pretend I don't get swept up in the atmosphere. Inevitably as I play, I have a big, dumb grin on my face. It's just that kind of game. Similarly, I can't really criticise it for not innovating the series – making big, sweeping changes for the sake of it feeling more different. It's easy to forget given how effortless everything feels, but the sheer detail of its environments and the level of craft evident in each of its over 500 cars is astounding.

This is what happens when a series gets to exist without any serious competition. It gets to focus on and perfect the things it's most interested in. While I'd love to know what *Forza Horizon* would look like if it had any serious rivals forcing it towards greater innovation, I'll happily make do with playing the most polished and confident *Forza Horizon* game made to date. ■



AFTERPARTY

Forza Horizon 5's *multiplayer explained*

OPEN RACING
Weirdness rating: Low

It's a race, just with real people. Pretty simple, really, but there's plenty of variety between the different cars, classes and terrain types.

HORIZON TOUR
Weirdness rating: Still low

Team up to take on an AI team in a series of races. The better each racer on your team places, the more points you earn.

PLAYGROUND GAMES
Weirdness rating: Slightly higher

FPS standards like capture the flag and king of the hill, but with cars. In my experience, these are often wildly unbalanced.

ELIMINATOR
Weirdness rating: Off the charts

It's battle royale, but with cars. It's got loot drops that give you better cars, a slowly closing ring and eliminations. Extremely bizarre.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

The series gets a new, lush setting, but otherwise is content to simply fine-tune an already winning formula.

90

Driving down a big volcano is as much fun as it looks.

The setting sure does look the part.

ABOVE: Live out your fantasy of crashing some of the world's most expensive cars.

LEFT: *Forza Horizon 5* has no chill.

BELOW: Street races are dangerous. Everyone here should go to jail.

ACT YOUR AGE

The unique civilisations are the stars, showing that less is more in AGE OF EMPIRES IV

By Robert Zak

With *Age of Empires II* still held up as a paragon of strategy games, you can see why new series developer Relic has decided to model *Age of Empires IV* on the second entry. The latest iteration strips away the complexities of *AoE III*, while adding welcome touches of its own. Chief among these are asymmetrical factions, which will elicit screams of bloody imbalance but count as the game's greatest success.

On the other hand, reverence to the past can be restricting, and I can't help but feel that *Age of Empires IV* could have been something more. While I respect Relic's decision to play things fairly safe, that should result in making what's already there really shine; polish those mosque minarets and Moscavian onion domes, pump up those population limits, let bodies fly with abandon upon impact from cannonballs and elephant heads.

Instead, there's a staid utilitarianism throughout much of *Age of Empires IV* – everything in it works much as it ever did, but without the flair that could have made it a grand celebration of that timeless *AoE* formula.

The campaigns follow the Normans, Mongols, Rus, and English across three distinct eras each. Interposed throughout each campaign are crisp documentary-like videos showing footage of significant castles, towns, landscapes, and battlefields as they are today, superimposing hundreds of wireframe soldiers over them.

It's Relic's bravest evolution of that precious *AoE* formula

The documentary style permeates into the campaigns themselves, with most of the stories told through a narrator rather than in-game characters. It keeps you at a distance from Genghis, Ivan the Terrible, and other movers, shakers of medieval history, which is disappointing given Relic's history of great RTS storytelling.

Regardless, the campaign throws up plenty of great set-pieces; there's the Battle of Xiangyang to establish Kublai Khan as Emperor of China, Dmitry Donskoy's power-shifting defeat of the Mongols at Kulikovo, and over in the west the Battle of Bremule to establish England as a regional power. These missions aren't easy either – on standard difficulty I found I had to quickly wrap my fingers around the new keyboard shortcuts to keep up.

But these sleek campaigns are just a foreword to the stories you'll be crafting on the Skirmish maps with the eight eclectic civs on offer. It's not a huge number, but the visual and strategic variety between these factions is one of the most significant evolutions in the series.

The Mongols are the biggest wildcard, capable of packing entire towns up into carts and relocating to anywhere on the map. For a simpler player like me, the Delhi Sultanate, with its war elephants and research system based around scholars, was a hoot, while the Rus accrue gold through hunting cabins and bounties.

Your path through the ages is further refined each time you advance an age, when you get to pick one of two civ-specific landmarks that will advance your empire in different directions.

A couple of the civs even have their own twists on age advancement. The Abbasids add wings onto their House of Wisdom instead of erecting new landmarks, while the Chinese can build two landmarks per age and found dynasties which grant bonuses. You can even 'build tall', with the Holy Roman Empire gaining bonuses based on buildings you place near their central structures. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A new entry in the iconic historical real-time strategy series

DEVELOPER
Relic Entertainment

PUBLISHER
Xbox Game Studios

REVIEWED ON
Ryzen 7 5800H, Nvidia GeForce 3070 (mobile), 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
ageofempires.com

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

A worthy new entry in the series that's equal parts progressive and dated. It could've been far better if it was bolder.

77

THE PEOPLE HAVE SPOKEN

The DLC packs people want most, according to a fan poll

MESOAMERICA
It's got to be the Aztecs. Before the Spanish came and cocked everything up, there was a rich history of conquest and politics between the Aztec city-states, leading to the Aztec Triple Alliance.

SOUTH EUROPE
A vast region with plenty of intriguing powers like Castillan, Venice and Genoa, though Byzantium is probably a favourite with its influence and gloriously turbulent history during the medieval era.

NORTH EUROPE
Everyone loves the Vikings, but the Viking era ended by the period covered in *AoE IV*, and the 12th-14th centuries were a time of Christianisation, unity, and relative peace in the land.

EASTERN EUROPE
Given that the Rus already feature, the next logical jump would be Poland, which began life as an nation in the tenth century. Sadly, this era predates the famous cavalry.

Campaign video footage superimposes wireframe soldiers onto modern scenery.

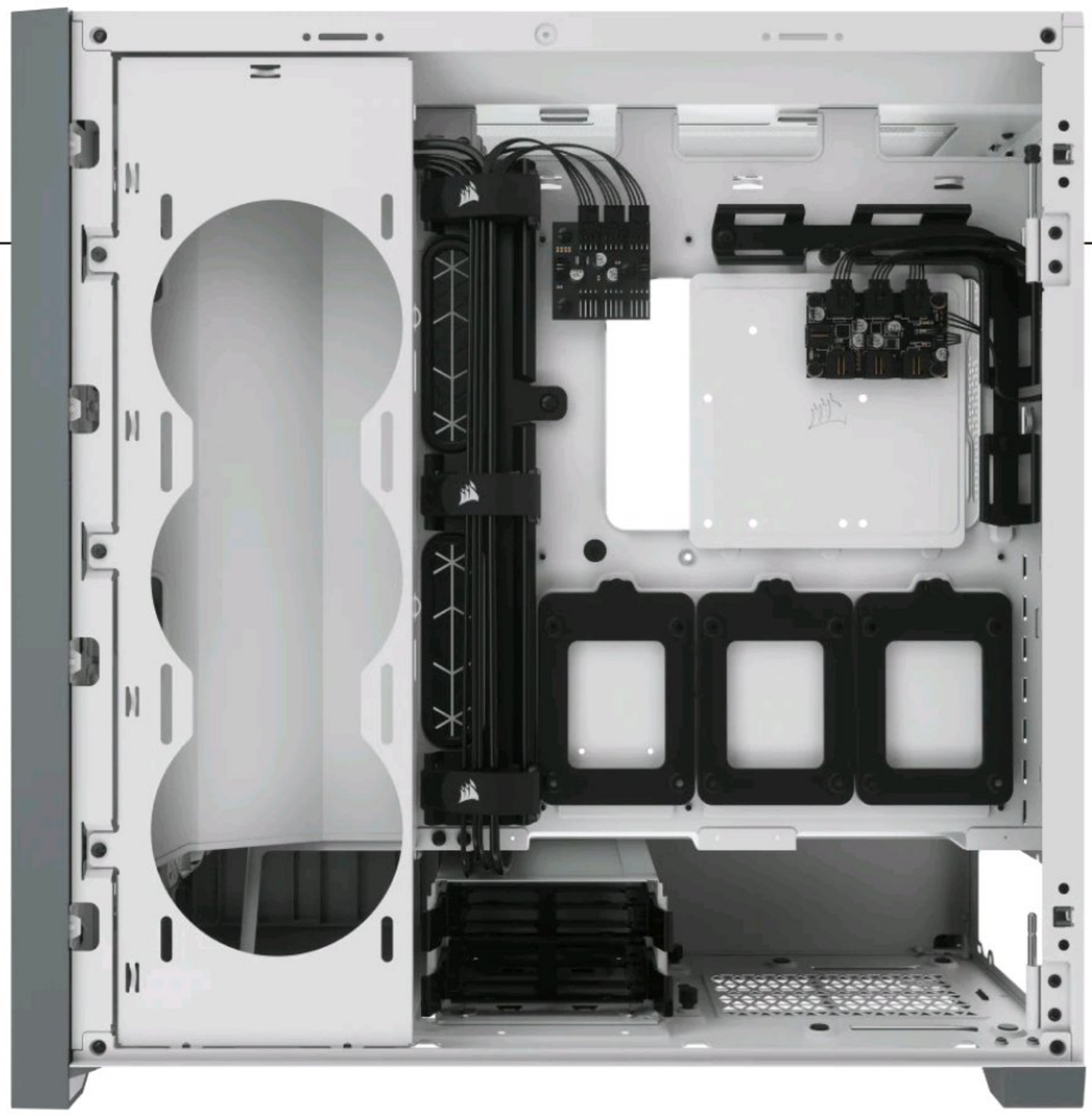
LEFT: Good luck replicating some of the large-scale campaign battles in Skirmish mode.

FAR LEFT: A Holy Roman battalion made up of Men-at-Arms and Landsknecht made quick work of the Chinese.

Piling in on the French city of Bayeux as Henry I in the Norman campaign.

THE PCPP TESTBENCH

CPU INTEL I7 7700K INTEL.COM.AU
MOBO ASUS Z270 ROG CROSSHAIR VI HERO ASUS.COM.AU
RAM 2 X BALLISTIX 8GB DDR4-3200 CRUCIAL.COM
PSU CORSAIR 850W PSU CORSAIR.COM
COOLING H105 CORSAIR COOLER WWW.CORSAIR.COM.AU



PC CASE

Corsair 5000X RGB

A majestic tower of glass opulence.

PRICE $279 **ONLINE** www.corsair.com

When Corsair announced its Obsidian 4000 Series cases, we particularly liked the glass 4000X for its superb RGB implementation and clean appearance, but it had one big drawback: thermals. With the Obsidian 5000X we have on the test bench today, Corsair addresses these concerns with an added intake on the right side of the case to aid the restricted front glass intake.

But priced at $280, there's a steep premium you pay for this performance potential – and I say potential, because the chassis doesn't come with the added fans you need to get the increase in thermal performance.

Tempered glass is featured not only on the left side, but also the front, top, and right side of the chassis. The glass comes with quite a dark tint, which although it will hide much of your internal components, does have a few benefits: It hides ugly cables in plain sight. You won't need to get choosy with a pretty motherboard or GPU, and it masks unused space as well.

Inside the main compartment of the Corsair 5000X, there is room for up to ATX-size motherboards, GPUs up to 420 mm long and CPU coolers up to 170mm tall. The space at the front of the case goes largely unused, though is of course necessary to create the clearance required to add the side intake. The rear of the system is covered up by a hinged metal door, which will work well to hide the cable clutter to keep things looking clean and tidy through the glass side panel.

If you want to populate all the fan slots, you'll be busy for a while as you can fit another three fans on the side, three 120mm spinners at the top (or 2x 140), and another 120mm or 140mm spinner at the rear exhaust. Of course, your AIO will probably take care of the top exhaust, but that still leaves another four fan slots open.

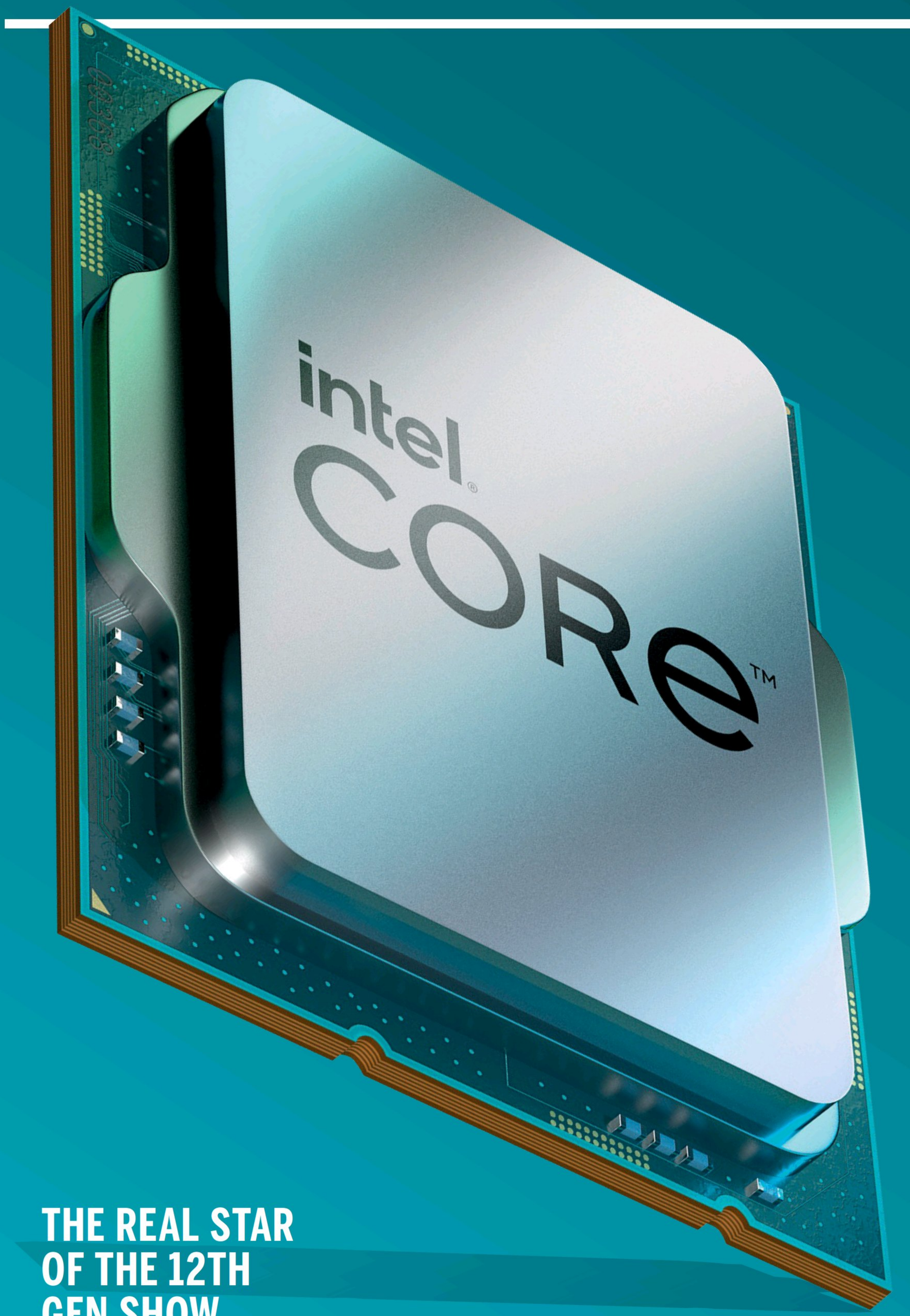
At the back of the motherboard tray there is a fan controller that splits a PWM signal into six headers, and an RGB header. The three included fans are connected to each of these controllers, leaving you room for three more. And that's where the problem comes in with this case. To use the added cooling potential it has over the 4000X, you need to purchase another three fans for the side intake, or else you might as well skip this case and go for the cheaper and smaller 4000X.

Corsair's 5000X RGB is, per usual Corsair fashion, well thought-out and a pleasure to use. It's a complete package, and although pricey, the build quality, ease of use, and looks are all there. Some might call it a bit boring, but to me Corsair is the Ikea of PC hardware – it's simple, easy to use, qualitatively good, and styled to match the majority of homes.
NIELS BROEKHUIJSEN

PC PowerPlay **VERDICT**

A beast of an enclosure, offering a solid foundation for big, majestic RGB builds.

70



THE REAL STAR OF THE 12TH GEN SHOW

REVIEW

INTEL CORE i5 12600K

This impressive bit of hardware shows how a little architecture can make a big difference. *By Jacob Ridley*

The humble Core i5 is the CPU that matters most for gamers. It's cheaper than a Core i7 or Core i9, but it still offers the fundamentals of what makes those chips great for gaming. With the Core i5 12600K that's no different, though that may be understating what this chip can really do.

That's because the Core i5 12600K isn't the modest CPU you expect: it's the equivalent of the top previous-gen chip in a package that's almost half the price, at around $520. That means it only took one generation, and less than 12 months, for Intel to take its Core i9 performance and deliver it inside a far cheaper Core i5 package. Since it's not pushing to the very limit of what Alder Lake can deliver in a single die, either, it's also a more power savvy design than the Core i9 12900K. That makes for a more well-rounded processor for mid- to high-end builds.

The Core i5 12600K really is shockingly good, and the deeper you dive into this chip's performance, the more you realise it's the real star of the 12th Gen show.

SPECS

EXPECT TO PAY:
$519

THREADS:
16

L3 CACHE (SMART CACHE):
20MB

L2 CACHE:
9.5MB

GRAPHICS:
UHD Graphics 770

MEMORY SUPPORT (UP TO):
DDR5 4800MT/s, DDR4 3200MT/s

DEEP DIVE

To understand why the Core i5 12600K is so impressive, you have to first know how it's pieced together. That's because there's something fundamentally different about Alder Lake to all chips that came before it: it's a hybrid. That means it comes with two different types of processing cores: Performance cores (P-cores) and Efficient cores (E-cores).

What this means is there are two different architectures powering most 12th Gen processors: Golden Cove and Gracemont. The Golden Cove architecture aims to be something close to your traditional CPU core, built to excel at single-threaded performance and deliver high clock speeds. These are the P-cores. The Gracemont architecture is something Alder Lake borrows from the Atom lineup of low-power chips. These are built to be power-efficient, and you can fit more of them onto a chip without taking up too much space. These are the E-cores.

That's dramatically underselling both architectures' intricacies, but it helps explain the Core i5 12600K's obscure specs. This chip comes with six P-cores and four E-cores, in what's known as a 6+4 design. That makes for a slight increase in overall core count over its predecessor, the Core i5 11600K, and more physical cores than even a Core i9 11900K.

I'll admit I wasn't always sure about these Efficient cores. Chip designer Arm has been rolling out big.LITTLE designs for a while to great success, but targeting the mobile market where power efficiency equates to longer battery life. Intel intends to bring Alder Lake to mobile, too, so I get that angle, but on the desktop side of things, what is a cluster of small cores built out of Intel's next-gen Atom architecture going to deliver to a PC gamer like me?

I should've known it wasn't all about raw numbers, clock speeds, and single-threaded performance, however. Intel's Efficient Cores are much more than you might first imagine. For starters, these cores help increase the multi-threaded performance, as you've simply got more cores to throw at a problem. Then, there's the ability to remove load from the P-cores in a pinch, which is really where these low-power cores come in handy for gaming. Say you're a streamer and you're trying to play a competitive title on one screen and beam your capture off to the world on the other. An Alder Lake CPU, with a little help from Windows 11, should be able to divvy up this workload in order to keep your P-cores focused on delivering gaming framerates and your E-cores on streaming over the web.

Therein lies some of Alder Lake's magic, but there's more to getting all of these architectures working together than simply placing them all on one chip. A large part of Intel's Alder Lake performance comes from utilising these two different cores in an effective manner. To do that it uses something called the Thread Director. This helps your OS decide which tasks should go to which cores, by handing your OS more information than it would otherwise have available to it.

Now, granted, a processor with a straight 16-cores, such as the Ryzen 9 5950X, is able to manage multiple workloads just too, but Alder Lake does have a few more tricks up its sleeve.

The most significant is DDR5. For a long while we've been happily plodding along with DDR4-powered machines, and these have started to hit incredible speeds, but times are a-changin'. DDR5 is already setting the bar higher for memory frequencies and performance, and Alder Lake is ready to meet it.

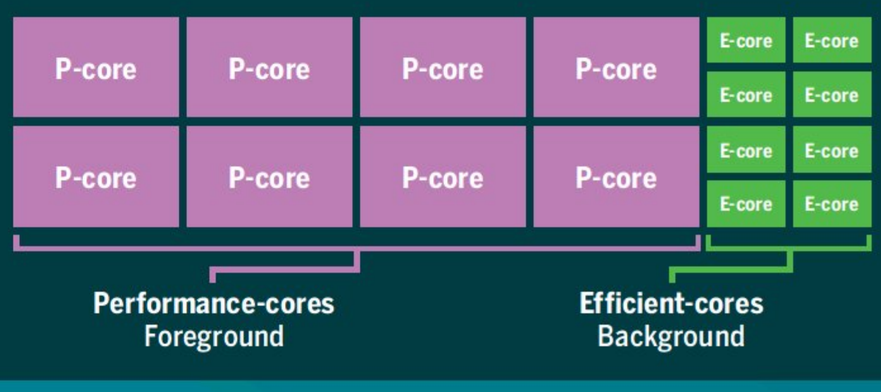
DDR5 kits do, however, come with generally higher price tags than DDR4. Unfortunately, that's the reality of a

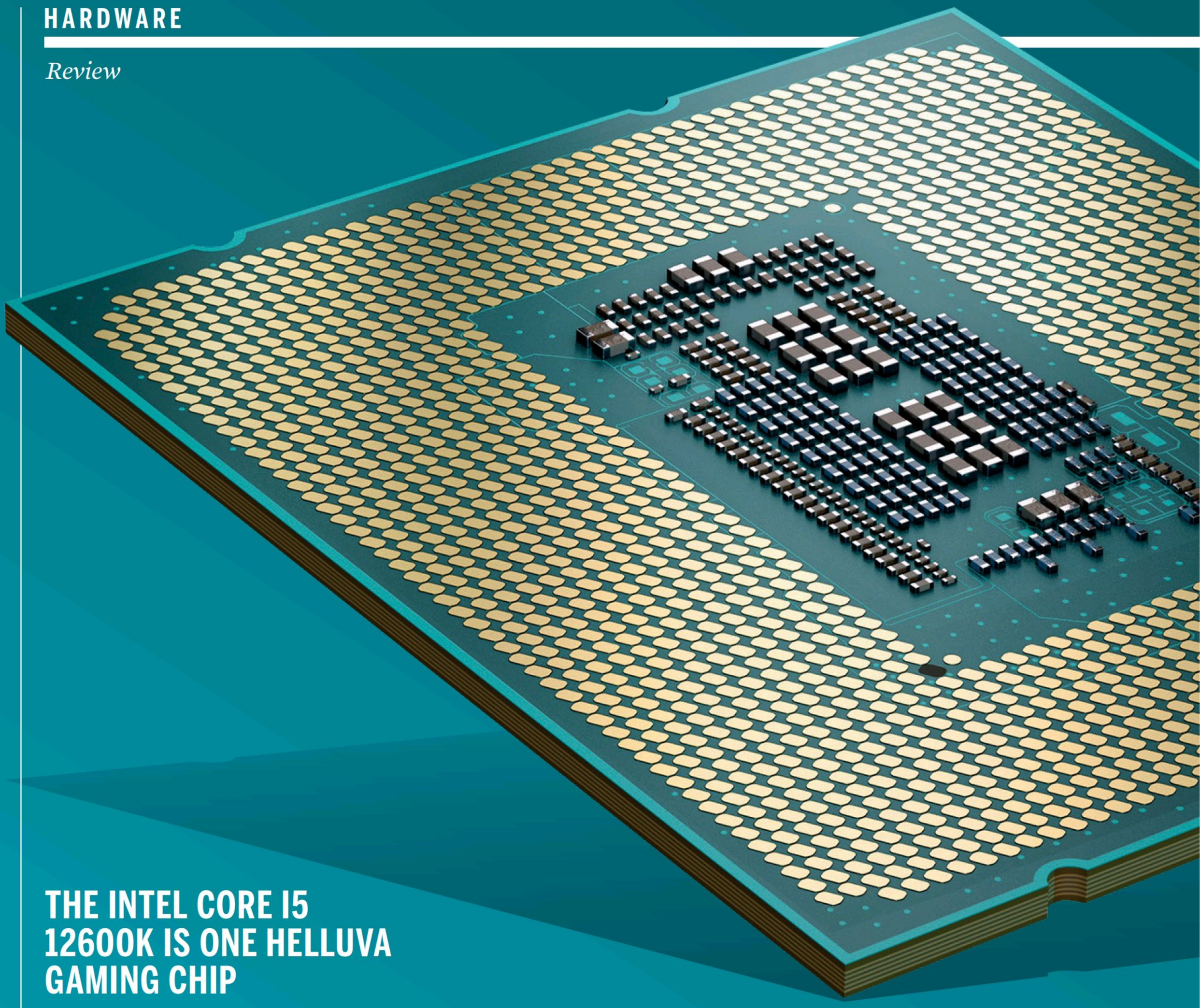
CORE STRENGTH

What's a core for?

PERFORMANCE CORES
- Fast
- Low latency
- Best for gaming and intensive workloads

EFFICIENT CORES
- Small footprint
- Power efficient
- Best for multithreaded applications and some background tasks





THE INTEL CORE I5 12600K IS ONE HELLUVA GAMING CHIP

brand new technology such as this coming to market, perhaps especially so because of the ongoing global shortages affecting all manner of chips. On the plus side, you can buy a DDR4 compatible motherboard and skip over the burgeoning DDR5 market altogether. Though do bear in mind that you are stuck with one or the other. So make your pick and be prepared to live with it for the rest of your chip's life. Or until you buy a new motherboard.

PERFORMANCE LEAP

The Intel Core i5 12600K is one helluva gaming chip. It skips through our benchmarking suite with relative ease, and only just falls behind the top-tier Core i9 12900K in a few games. When considering the competition, it crushes AMD's Ryzen 5 5600X, though it's at its most impressive when it's storming ahead of the Core i9 11900K.

It's enough to beat the Ryzen 5 5600X, which is a chip we're very fond of here, but it's another thing altogether for this chip to run circles around the Core i9 11900K. In terms of CPU package power, the Core i5 12600K is a far less power-hungry processor than the Core i9 11900K, too, despite being faster in almost every way. It's still not quite a match for AMD's Ryzen 5 5600X in terms of power efficiency, which is testament to the overall efficiency of AMD's Ryzen 5000-series. That's the same story with the high-end Core i9 12900K, too – Intel just can't seem to nail down the efficiency that AMD is able to deliver.

Aside from gaming, the Core i5 12600K can dispatch a video editing job without breaking much of a sweat. The multithreaded performance from its many cores, some of which are E-cores, is wholly impressive – proof that those E-cores aren't weak sauce when it comes to demanding compute tasks.

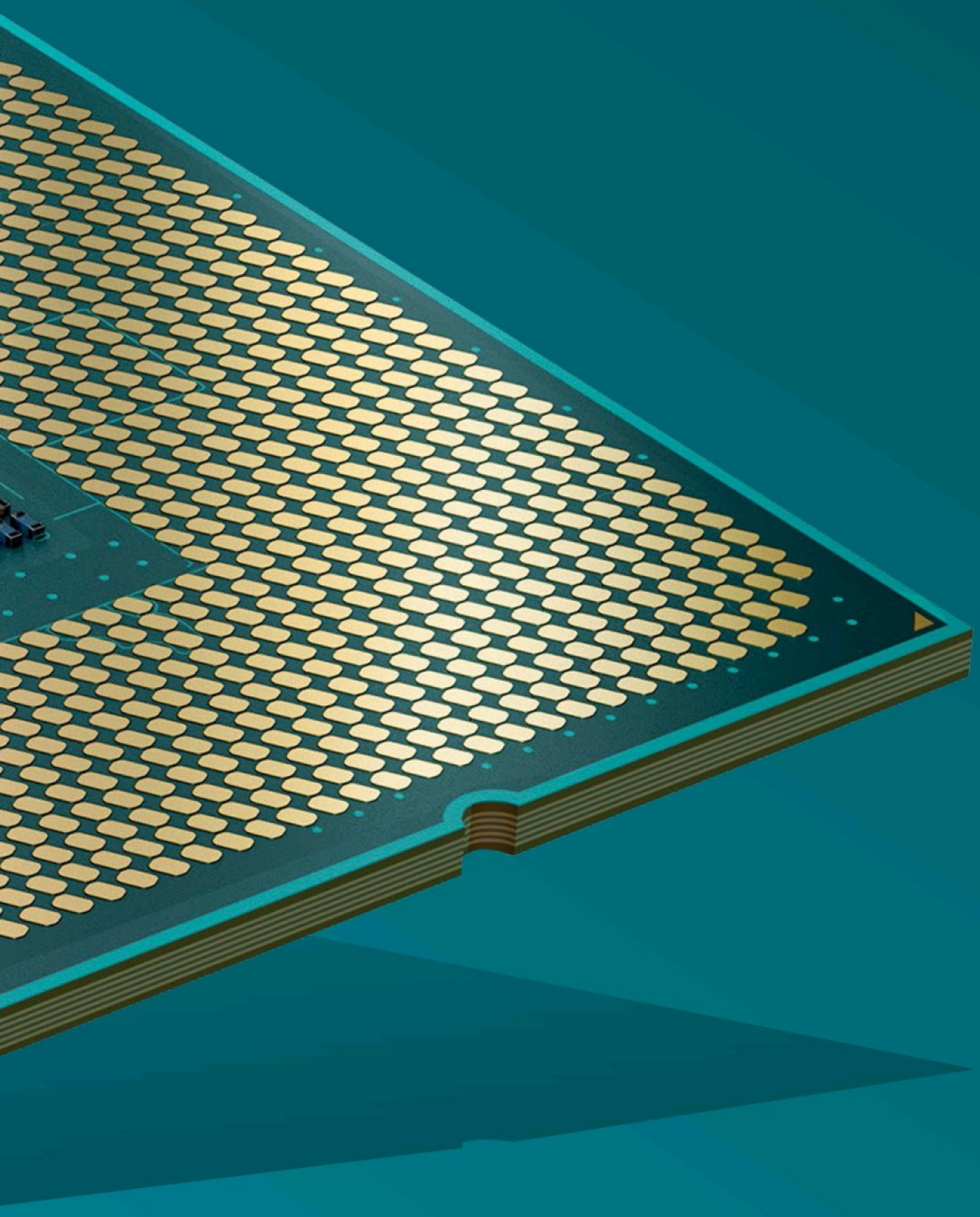
Generally, though, the Core i5 12600K is a fantastic gaming chip through and through, and it's a prime example of what Intel can deliver when it's not chasing AMD's coat tails. It's roughly priced the same as AMD's chip, perhaps a touch pricier in practice, but it offers an entirely different class of performance with reasonable power demands.

ABOVE: The right chip can make a world of difference.

NEXT-GEN

AMD has its work cut out following the release of the Core i5 12600K, and that's great news for PC builders. Intel's mid-range hasn't felt quite so at a loss as its high-end chips have these past generations, with chips such as the Core i5 11600K being one of our favourites in recent years, but the Core i5 12600K really takes those agreeable Core i5 qualities and turns them up to 11. Or rather, 12.

Also, in as much as the Intel Core i5 12600K isn't only a mighty chip on its own, it's also the keys to a whole next-gen platform. DDR5 and PCIe 5.0 SSDs are all extravagant luxuries for now, but the Core i5 12600K's clever balance of price and performance makes the entire 12th Gen platform a little more digestible if you're not prepared to spend thousands of dollars.



There is still the question of platform costs, though, and that's probably my biggest concern with the 12th Gen today. Compatible motherboards with the new Z690 chipset are pricey, and especially so when compared to the AM4 platform that AMD's Ryzen processors work with.

Yet in offering the same performance, if not better, than the top Intel processor in early 2021 – Rocket Lake came out in March, people – for nearly half the cost, Intel has won me over with the Core i5 12600K.

INTEL'S BACK

The Core i5 12600K is the best CPU for gaming right now, if you're in any way a sensible person. I'm not a sensible person and I'd want the Core i9 12900K or Ryzen 9 5950X just because, but if you really boil it down to price to performance, performance per watt, and sense check yourself for just a moment, the Core i5 12600K is the chip that comes out on top. There's some glimmer of hope that Intel may be able to deliver enough of this chip for its price to stick around, and that means we might finally have a piece of gaming hardware that actually appears to be a good deal. With the state of graphics cards right now, even suggesting that feels wrong. But it's true, the Core i5 12600K is a good deal. The biggest concern remains the platform costs, but given some decently priced Z690 motherboards, and the release of cheaper Alder Lake chips next year, those might drop with a little more time.

With that said, it remains that the Core i5 12600K is a high-end chip masquerading as a mid-range hero, and doing a great job of it. Place it at the centre of your next gaming PC and you wouldn't be putting a foot wrong. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Faster and more efficient than its predecessors, this is simply the best CPU available for PC gaming in 2022.

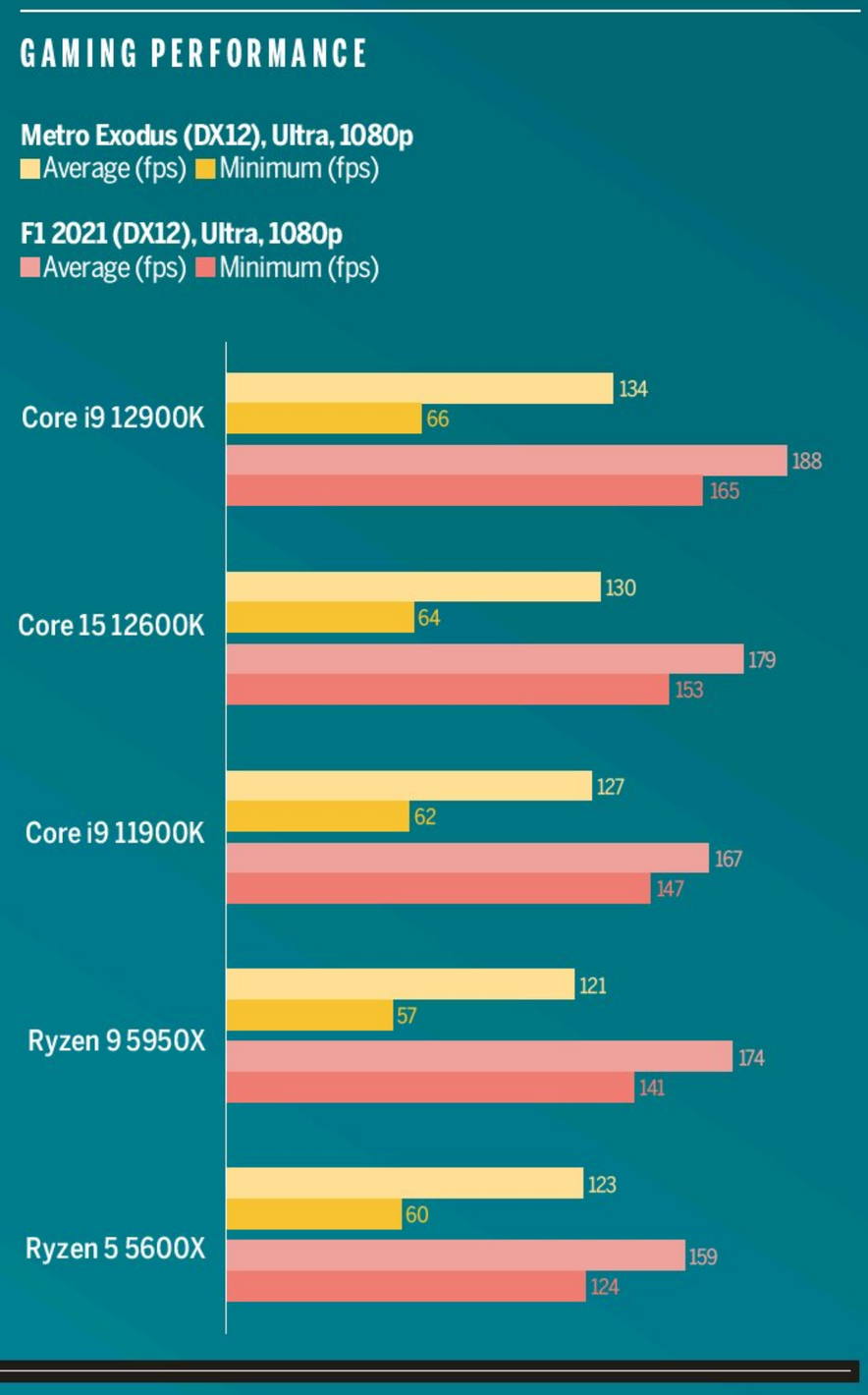
94

BENCHMARKS

CINEBENCH R23

CPU PACKAGE POWER

GAMING PERFORMANCE



GROUP TEST

CPU AIR COOLERS

Keep your chip cool and quiet with one of PC Gamer's recommended air coolers.

By Chris Szewczyk

These days all-in-one liquid coolers seem to get all the attention. I get it, they look awesome and really add some personality to your rig. But let's say you don't have the budget for a liquid cooling solution but still need to cool your CPU. Here's where the best CPU air coolers come in. Even the most expensive air cooler is nowhere near the cost of an AIO liquid cooler, and they offer simplicity and reliability.

Following the bigger is better mantra is a good start towards finding your ideal air cooler, but you need to make sure it fits in your case. Noctua's NH-D15 is a mighty beast, to say the least. There's also some leeway on style here. While maybe not as flashy as some liquid coolers, some air coolers do come with RGB lighting to add some pizzazz to your rig.

1

AS500 Plus

DEEPCOOL $99

A fantastic all-round cooler

1 The Deepcool AS500 received worthy attention when it was released, but the AS500 Plus with its additional fan elevates it to the point where it can compete with any single tower cooler on the market. At the same time, it undercuts competitors in price. Even if you spent double the money on a premium single tower cooler, your cooling performance won't be a lot better.

Its cooling ability belies its compact dimensions. Only more expensive dual tower coolers beat it, but not by a lot. Its dual fan design no doubt helps, though it's also quiet. Cooling and low noise levels are welcome, then add to that great build quality and subtle ARGB good looks and there's nothing to complain about. It even comes with its own ARGB controller, and there's a white version too if you like. The Deepcool AS500 Plus punches above its weight. Short of stressing it with an overclocked high-end processor, the AS500 Plus ticks all the boxes.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Great value
- Low noise levels
- Efficient cooling

SPECS SOCKET SUPPORT: INTEL 1200, 1150, 1151, 1155, 2011, 2066, AMD AM4, AM3, AM2, FM2 & FM1 COMPATIBLE / **FANS:** 2X 140 MM PWM / **FAN SPEEDS:** 500-1200 RPM / **DIMENSIONS (L X W X H):** 140 MM X 102 MM X 164 MM / **NOISE LEVEL:** MAX 31.5 DB(A)

Pure Rock 2

BE QUIET! $69

An affordable and effective cooler that's very quiet

2 If the brand name didn't already give it away, the Be Quiet Pure Rock 2 really is quiet! It's a single tower cooler equipped with the company's highly regarded Pure Wings 2 PWM fan which carries a low 26.8 dB(A) noise rating. That means it's very quiet indeed. It feels really solid too, an indicator of good build quality, even at its low price. We wouldn't describe the Pure Rock 2 as the most beautiful cooler on the market. But if you do have a windowed case, you could consider the smarter black version for a more polished look instead. The Pure Rock 2 is primarily designed to cool, unseen and unheard.

Though perhaps its 150W TDP is a touch optimistic, and at least an Intel Core i5 11600K or AMD Ryzen 7 5800X won't present a problem for the Pure Rock 2. For anything other than high-end CPUs the Pure Rock 2 will keep your chip cool and quiet. If you're not interested in bling and want something that's a step up from bundled coolers, this is great.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Very quiet operation
- Great price
- Good build quality

SPECS SOCKET SUPPORT: INTEL LGA 1150, 1151, 1155, 1200, 2011, 2011-3, 2066, AMD AM3 & AM4 COMPATIBLE / **FANS:** 1X PURE WINGS 2 120MM / **FAN SPEEDS:** UP TO 1500 RPM / **DIMENSIONS (L X W X H):** 87 MM X 121 MM X 155 MM / **NOISE LEVEL:** MAX 26.8 DB(A)

EXCELLENT FANS THAT ARE A WELCOME BLACK COLOUR

NH-D15 Chromax Black

NOCTUA $169

Air cooling at its best

3 The Noctua NH-D15 Chromax Black is considered by many to be the best air cooler on the market. We really love it too. It performs brilliantly, it's got excellent fans that are a welcome black colour, and its build quality is fantastic. Really only 360mm AIO coolers outperform it. If you want an air cooler that can handle any consumer CPU on the market, you might find one to match the Noctua flagship, but you won't find any that truly beat it. Under normal operation the NH-D15 can be considered silent, but when pushed hard it becomes louder than you might expect. Though we don't mind having some optional cooling headroom when needed.

Its expense, and sheer size, are the only things that count against it in my eyes. Notably, though, Noctua has a tradition of support for new sockets, and LGA 1700 support will either be included in the box or available to you as a free kit, depending on when that NH-D15 was made.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Excellent fans
- Optional cooling headroom
- Can handle any consumer CPU

SPECS SOCKET SUPPORT: INTEL LGA 1150, 1151, 1155, 1156, 1200, 2011, 2011-3, 2066, AMD AM4, AM3, AM2, FM2 & FM1 COMPATIBLE / **FANS:** 2X NF-A15 HS-PWM / **FAN SPEEDS:** 300-1500 RPM / **DIMENSIONS (L X W X H):** 161 MM X 150 MM X 165 MM / **NOISE LEVEL:** MAX 24.6 DB(A)

NH-P1

NOCTUA $199

Quiet computing enthusiasts, look here

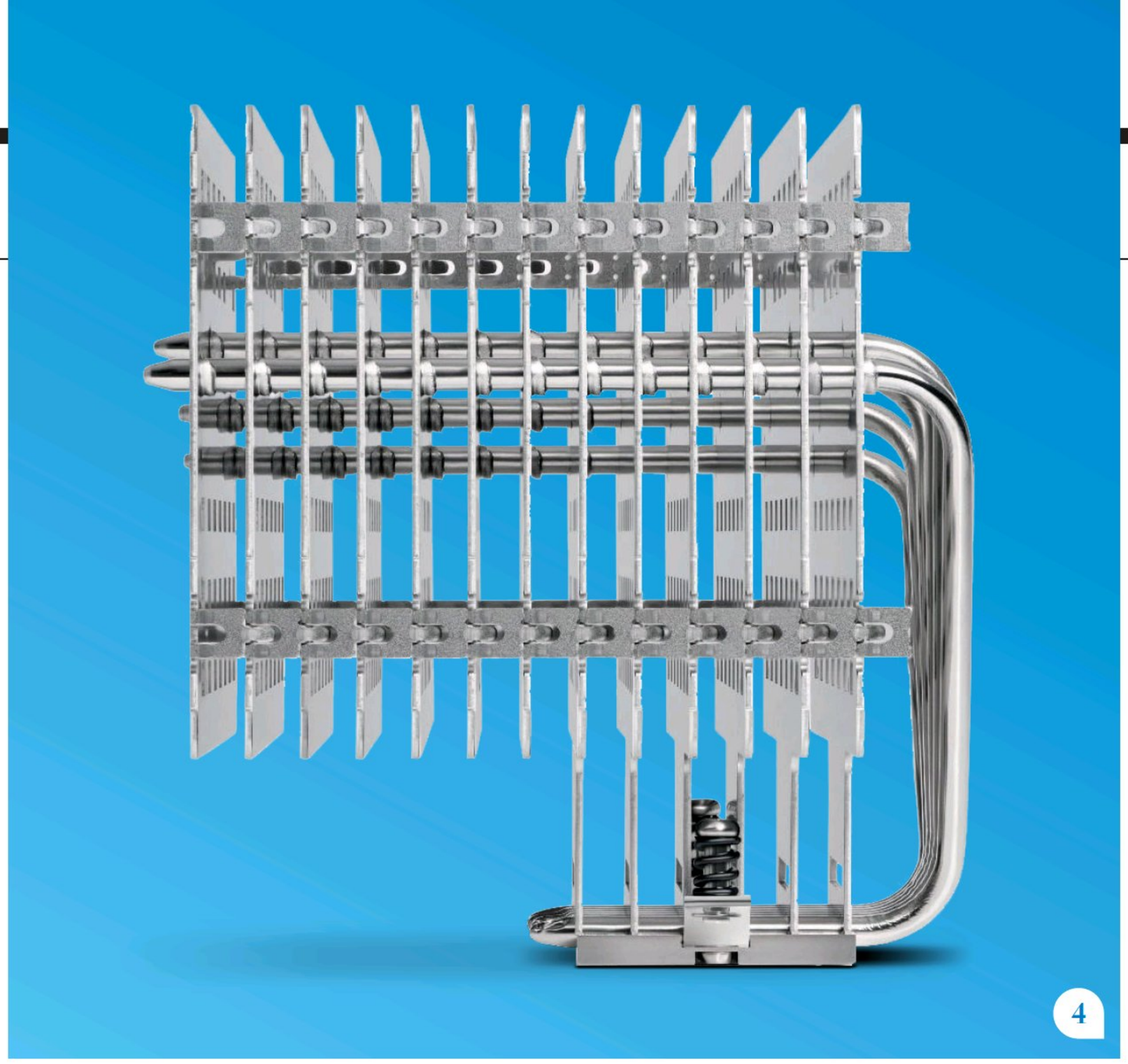
4 Noctua's NH-P1 passive cooler is very much a niche product, and one that fans of quiet computing have been looking forward to for some time. It's expensive, bulky, and generally limited to CPUs in the 65W range. Sounds like a dud? Hell no. Its appeal may be limited, but if you're a user who values silence above anything else, then the NH-P1 will be exactly what you're looking for. The NH-P1 is a great match for something like an AMD 5700G. That way you could omit a discrete GPU and play esport titles in silence. The NH-P1 will keep this class of CPU boosting to its max, but only if you have at least some airflow. The chances are you have a rear case fan that's not far away from it anyway. If you want, you can still opt to attach a fan, too.

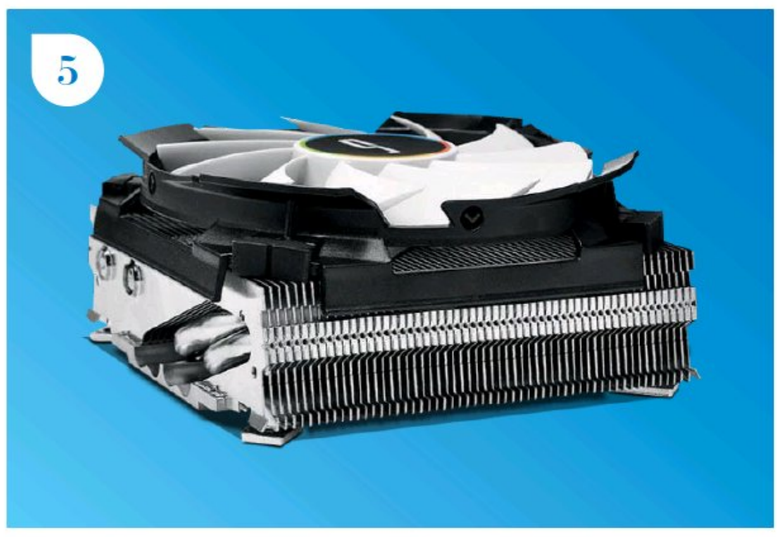
The NH-P1 is built for a specific purpose. If you sleep near your PC or run a lounge room media centre, the NH-P1 will go a long way to ensuring that your PC is truly silent. Clearly it's not meant for everyone though.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Silent!
- Every aspect of it is premium
- You can add fans if you want

SPECS SOCKET SUPPORT: INTEL LGA 1150, 1151, 1155, 1156, 1200, 2011, 2011-3, 2066, AMD AM4, AM3, AM2, FM2 & FM1 COMPATIBLE / **FANS:** N/A / **FAN SPEEDS:** N/A / **DIMENSIONS (L X W X H):** 152MM X 154 MM X 158 MM / **NOISE LEVEL:** 0 DB(A)





WHAT CPU SOCKETS DO AIR COOLERS WORK WITH?

Not all coolers support all CPU sockets. Cooling for AMD Threadripper CPUs can be tricky, for example, as the sheer size of these chips mean you'll want proper coverage for optimum cooling. Similarly, Intel 12th Gen LGA 1700 compatibility is now a topic of discussion, so pay close attention to the list of supported sockets if you're investing in one of those. Stock from earlier in 2021 will definitely lack support, but you may be able to find a compatibility kit.

When it comes to AMD Ryzen desktop CPU support, things get a little easier. Aside from the aforementioned Threadripper chips, all other Ryzen CPUs use the same AM4 socket. That means that any CPU cooler that lists AM4 support is good right the way up to the current Ryzen 5000-series CPUs.

C7

CRYORIG $99

A great choice for a truly tiny system

5 The Cryorig C7 has been on the market for some time, but it's been updated to support newer sockets. It's perfect for a truly compact small form factor system thanks to its 47mm height and adherence to 'keep-out' zones, where it will not interfere in any way with other system components.

The C7 destroys the stock Intel cooler. It's rated for up to 100W but is better suited to 65W class CPUs. This leaves it a bit of headroom for Turbo bursts. If you're overclocking, or using a high core-count processor, you can give it a pass, but that's to be expected. With the right CPU it will stay surprisingly quiet for its compact size. Its top flow design will help to cool the VRM and M.2 SSD, too, something that can be neglected in compact systems.

The Cryorig C7 is a niche cooler, but for the tiniest builds, the C7 does an admirable job. If you want a little bit of extra TDP headroom, there are copper and graphene coated versions, too.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- → Truly tiny size
- → Cools well considering its size
- → Quiet low load operation

SPECS SOCKET SUPPORT: INTEL 1200, 1150, 1151, 1155, 1156, AMD AM4, AM3, AM2, FM2 & FM1 COMPATIBLE / **FANS:** 1X 92MM QUAD AIR INLET / **FAN SPEEDS:** 600-2500 RPM / **DIMENSIONS (L X W X H):** 97 MM X 97 MM X 47 MM / **NOISE LEVEL:** MAX 30 DB(A)

Dark Rock TF 2

BE QUIET! $139

Cooling for your whole system

6 Keeping your CPU cool is vital, but so is overall system cooling. A cooler like the Be Quiet Dark Rock TF 2 blows air downwards, which helps to keep hot running M.2 drives, and your vital motherboard VRM, running cool. This is something that can often be overlooked in AIO cooled systems that lack good airflow over the motherboard, particularly if you have a GPU heating up everything around it. The Dark Rock TF2 performs much like other single tower air coolers, and though it's on the pricey side, it's not unreasonably so given the inclusion of two high-quality fans. Its ability to mount a fan above or below the heatsink (or both) adds a lot of installation flexibility. You can use it in all kinds of systems from powerful gaming PCs through to compact SFF systems.

In the Be Quiet tradition, the Dark Rock TF 2 is very quiet, particularly under low loads and with a rating of up to 230W, it can handle all modern CPUs, though overclocking will be beyond it.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- → Downward blowing for more cooling
- → Quiet operation
- → Good build quality

SPECS SOCKET SUPPORT: INTEL LGA 1150, 1151, 1155, 1200, 2011, 2011-3, 2066, AMD AM3 & AM4 COMPATIBLE / **FANS:** 1X SILENT WINGS 3 135MM, 1X SILENT WINGS 135 MM / **FAN SPEEDS:** UP TO 1400 RPM / **DIMENSIONS (L X W X H):** 163 MM X 140 MM X 134 M / **NOISE LEVEL:** MAX 27.1 DB(A)

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SIN

Remembering the last shooter of the pre-*Half-Life* world. *By Phil Iwaniuk*

On November 19, 1998, Sierra released *Half-Life*. In the time it took to install 300MB of exquisitely poised shooter off its CD-ROM, everything from the genre prior became part of a bygone era. And perhaps the unluckiest of the lot was Ritual's *SiN*, which released just ten days before it.

Here was a game that, like *Half-Life*, wanted to bring a bit more storytelling back to the genre after a long period of dominance from dialogue-averse id Software and similarly laconic newcomers Epic Games. It had a spectacularly named hero in John Blade, and in its antagonist Elexis Sinclaire a typically salacious depiction of a woman – though to give Ritual some credit, both black player-characters and female CEOs were wildly progressive ideas for the era. It had voice actors. It was set in a recognisable near-future. There wasn't an inverted cross, alien landscape, or power-up in sight. If John Romero wasn't already turning in the grave he was slowly digging for himself at Ion Storm, the posters on *SiN*'s walls hilariously stating 'Lex to make Romero her bitch' on them would have sealed it.

Though it was destined to be forgotten in Gordon Freeman's wake, the story goes like this: billionaire biotech company owner and apparent PVC fetishist Elexis Sinclaire is making dangerous drugs that mutate humans into giant veiny hitboxes down in the Sintek labs. Freeport City PD's finest and most implausibly musclebound colonel John R Blade gets wind of the scheme when his Hardcorps team is called into a bank robbery led by a mob boss who abruptly erupts into something beastly and inhuman mid-chase. Blade, with hacker sidekick JC in his earpiece and splicing into various mainframes from back at headquarters, must track down the supply of the street drug U-4 causing the mutations and take down Sintek.

TOP: Don't do drugs, kids – or else.

Not one for the Booker shortlist, but *SiN*'s great appeal was, and remains, the sheer exuberance with which it goes about telling that tale. It's a game full of moments that clearly, *transparently* began with someone at Ritual saying, "It'd be cool if..." Design document be damned. Market research can do one. What can this new toy of 3D interactive space do?

It can drop you from a helicopter into a bank heist in progress. It can turn a construction site shootout into a platforming puzzle, and then throw a driveable digger in there purely to allow the player to bash a

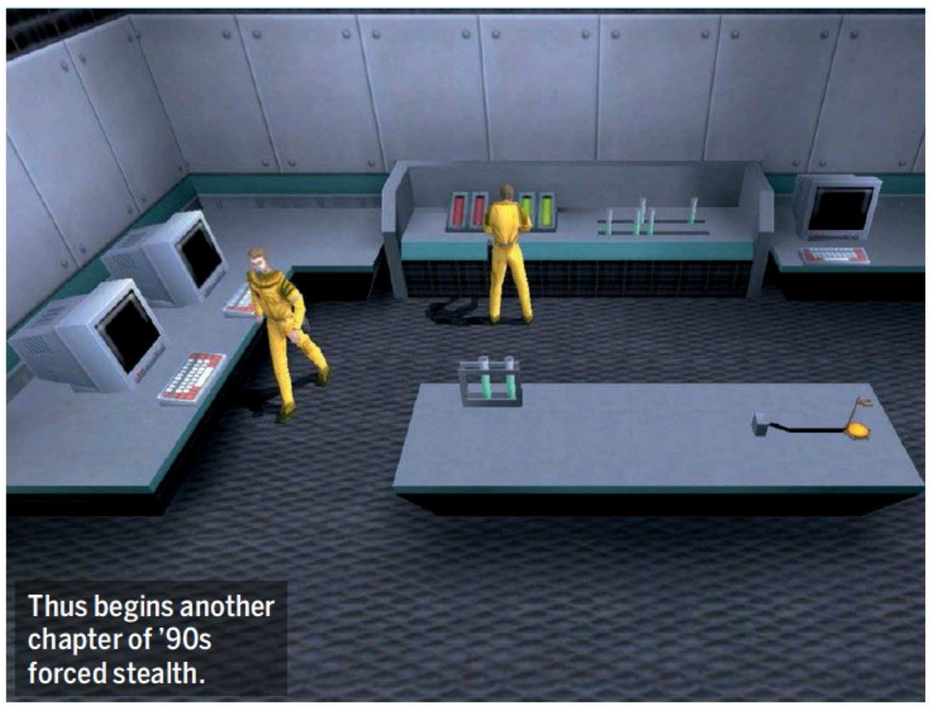
NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
1998

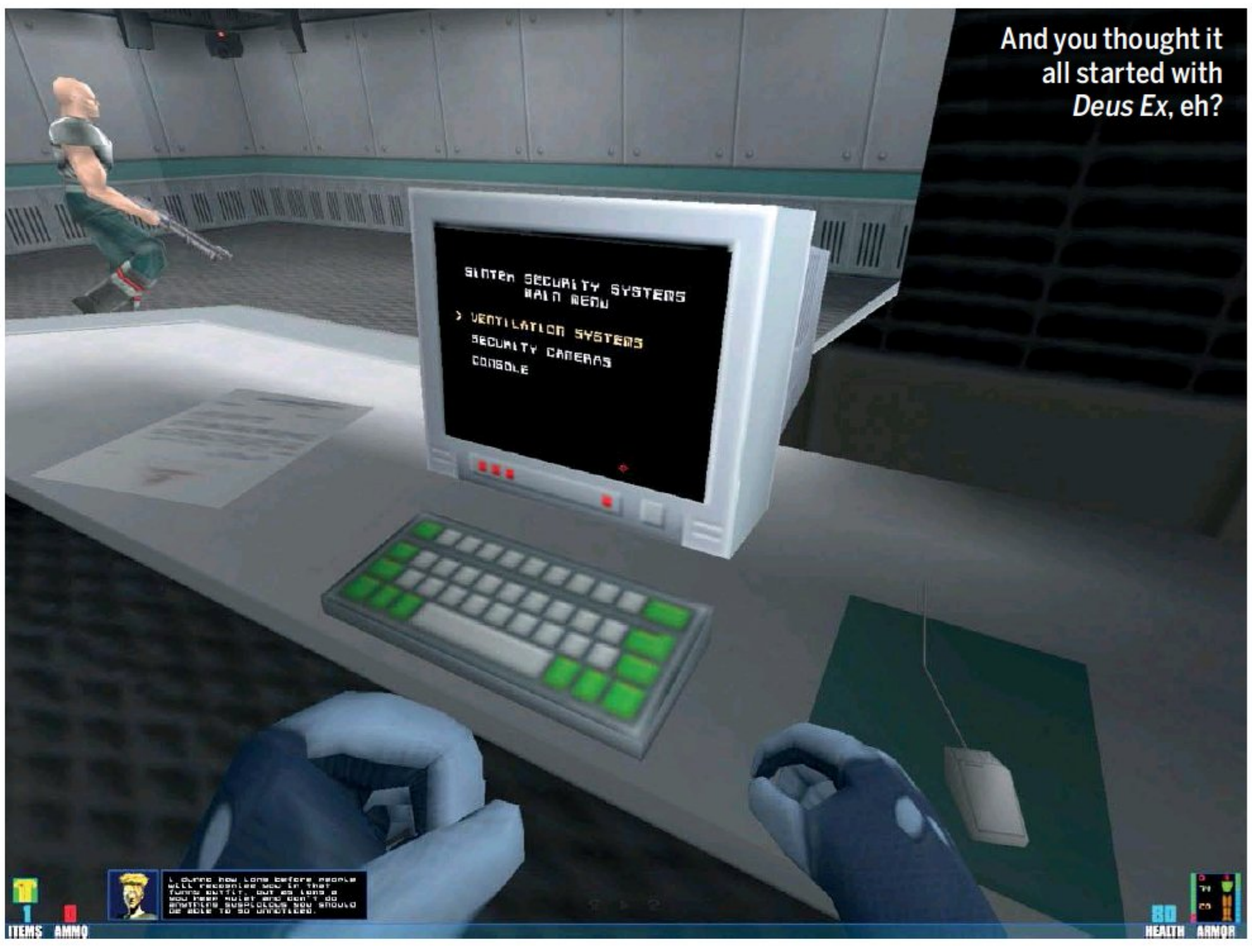
DEVELOPER
Ritual Entertainment

PUBLISHER
Activision

LINK
bit.ly/3krVRVs



Thus begins another chapter of '90s forced stealth.



hole in the wall in real-time, then get out, and never operate another vehicle again. What was a bombastic corridor shooter in a subway station five minutes ago becomes a stealth game that asks you to sneak around the Sintek labs with nothing but judicious use of the crouch button to mask your presence.

CREEPING DEATH

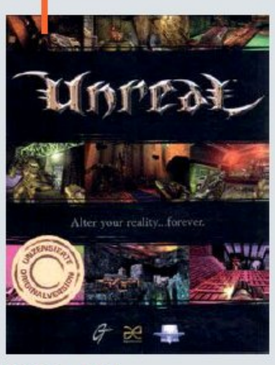
That stealth section, just five missions into the story, proved an impasse for me at the time of *SiN*'s release. It's tricky to shuffle around the many nigh-identical rooms of the laboratory and tick off the mission objectives without a single NPC, guard or camera spotting me now. To

THERE WASN'T AN INVERTED CROSS, ALIEN LANDSCAPE OR POWER-UP IN SIGHT

13-year-old hands in '98, it was unassailable. It would be months before I'd get to see its later levels. Months spent in the uncaring vision cones of Sintech's spider robots and wall-mounted miniguns. The indignity of Mr Blade himself sliced and diced by high-calibre rounds. Modern sentiment towards such a hurdle at the hands of clumsy stealth mechanics would be damning, but you didn't excommunicate a game for trying something in the beige age.

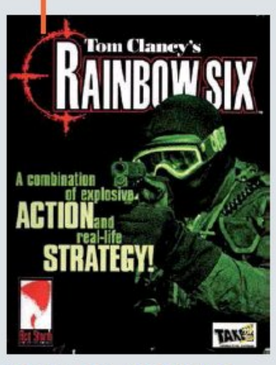
Besides, I'd previously spent several days stuck on a construction site puzzle that required you to look up and shoot a girder out of the sky in order to rupture a water pipe at your feet, allowing Blade to swim out of the hole he was in. And another few days figuring out a platforming run behind some loose bricks and ascending the floors of a derelict building in the precious few seconds before a bomb went off. What was another few weeks reloading the same quicksave?

YEAR OF THE GUN *A timeline of shooters from 1998*



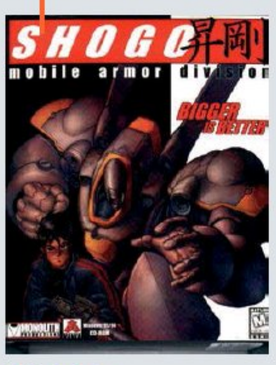
UNREAL
MAY 22

Wake up on a wrecked prison space ship, meet Skarj, shoot Skarj, look incredulously at nice water. Pretty shallow, but *Unreal* made a leap forwards visually from incumbent FPS king *Quake II*.



TOM CLANCY'S RAINBOW SIX
AUGUST 21

Guns, yes, but also: tactics. A revolutionary idea only diminished by the clumsy planning stage which worked a bit like giving RTS-style orders then executing them.

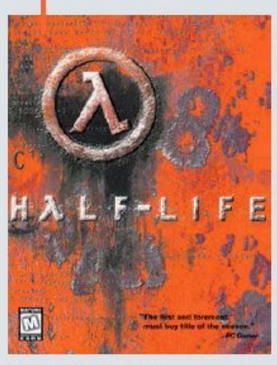


SHOGO M.A.D.
SEPTEMBER 30

Mechs, yes, but also: guns. Will the revolutionary shooter ideas never cease this year? Monolith's take on the FPS stood apart from the *Quake* clones. Also about 20 feet taller.

SIN
NOVEMBER 9

As *Quake* and *Unreal* dialled back exposition and dialogue, *SiN* wanted to take FPS gaming in a more cinematic direction. Characters, plot, set-pieces... it was a grand plan.



HALF-LIFE
NOVEMBER 19

It upstaged *SiN*. It made *Unreal* feel like a tech demo. *Tom Clancy's* waypoints and *Shogo*'s mechs were laid to waste. So were the next 300 shooters. Gordon changed it all, forever.

Reinstall

ABOVE: Mancini was no looker even before the mutation.

SINCLAIR SPECTRUM

After clearing the stealth mission though, *SiN*'s digressions from the corridor shooting vogue of the time are fewer. Levels within Sinclair's wicked facility can come and go with little imprint on the memory. There's a sense that after the freewheeling nature of its opening levels, any further conversations that began, "It'd be cool if..." ended with, "Yeah, but we ship in two months." Laboratories give way to warehouses and sewage works that might be visiting from any number of other shooters from that period, before *SiN* seems to remember itself again and start flinging absurdly and hilariously disparate locations at you. Oil rigs. Jungle. The ocean floor. All perfectly reasonable places for a policeman to visit in pursuit of an evil biotech boss.

While the cohesion of its levels ebbs and flows in the moment, Ritual's commitment to interactive toys is a constant. Computer consoles are a particular highlight, offering the odd moment of proto-immersive sim problem-solving. Then and now, the kick of disabling a whole area's cameras or turrets from within a security room hits beautifully. You might even pad Blade's bank balance out by transferring funds from any number of Freeport City Bank's customers, including one Billge Yeates and Elexis Sinclaire herself. Evidently nobody told her about company accounts. Twenty-three years later it's still unclear what the advantage is of doing this, or why Ritual saw fit to include it in the game. Like so many of *SiN*'s extraneous touches, I'm glad they did.

Most lavish of all is the training facility, a lovingly constructed tutorial area that many players would wilfully breeze past on the way to a new game, or fail to spot on the main menu screen. Anyone who does would miss out on the skeet shooting and sniping ranges, the shooting galleries where cardboard terrorists and civilians pop up, and the inconspicuous buttons on the wall that deploy bleachers from the wall, as if all of John's buddies are about to down tools and watch his mastery. Before you even get on the helicopter to that bank, you're sold on the future-cop fantasy.

BLADE RUNNER

Before you install the game, in fact. *SiN*'s manual sets the scene before disc ever meets disc tray, detailing Blade's troubled dreams and disturbed visions in diary form. A life on the beat, it appears, has taken its toll on the man's psyche, and the appearance of a new street drug that makes monsters of people has done nothing to take the load off.

BRINGING LEXY BACK

What Ms Sinclaire did next

WAGES OF SIN 1999
An expansion pack that pits John Blade against a crime boss who wants to take over Freeport.

SIN: THE MOVIE 2000
Despite carrying the name, the animated movie adaptation plays pretty fast and loose with canon.

SIN: EPISODES 2006
An episodic sequel with only one episode, titled 'Emergence'. Poor sales did for the rest.

SIN RELOADED 2022?
A Night Dive remake running on the studio's Kex Engine, coming out soon.

He's quite a talented sketch artist too, is John. The nightmare visions he puts into form, all bulging eyes and blood vessels, are expertly drawn, if partially obscured by the manual's faux coffee rings.

Quite *why* Elexis Sinclaire wants to make monsters of people, all bulging eyes and blood vessels, is a question *SiN* barely scratches. She's evil. She's super-rich. Her eyebrows arch at an especially cruel angle. That's all the insight as we get into the chief antagonist, which is as much of a shame as the asphyxiating latex she's almost always wearing. As if a buttoned up blouse and pantsuit would have been the difference between playing it and leaving it on the shelf.

Blade and JC fare much better under deeper character scrutiny. In keeping the cocksure young hacker away from the action and thus safe to chip in frequent jibes at his enormous boss, *SiN* finds a way to bring in some buddy cop comedy and make it the game's own.

Having JC there to observe the extraordinary events you're shooting through and then banter with you elevates the story beyond its prosaic plotting. Without a spiky haired white hat watching, Blade would get away with donning a lab tech's yellow overalls to disguise himself without ridicule. And that would be infinitely duller. As a helpful objective reminder and mechanic explainer, he's there to address the player as much as the protagonist, but in the end it's JC's warm and insouciant bro-ing out with Blade that stands as one of the game's more enduring components.

SIN FINDS A WAY TO BRING IN BUDDY COP COMEDY AND MAKE IT THE GAME'S OWN

AGE OF INNOCENCE

It's natural to feel nostalgic for this halcyon period of PC gaming, particularly since it's been so adept at archiving and updating itself over the years – Night Dive just released a Gold version to Steam featuring the *Wages of SiN* expansion, and plans a full remaster soon. But the exact nature of what was so good about those days anyway can be hard to pinpoint.

Enter a wobbly *Quake II* engine shooter, all ideas and precious little polish, that serves a handy reminder that a crucial player in the PC gaming golden age was naivety. Ideas, set-pieces, and mechanics thrown in with reckless vigour and scant regard for timelines. Modern game dev is smart and efficient. *SiN* had fully animated bleachers in the skeet shooting range of its optional police training level.

Not that we lavished praise on this game and its ilk for their generosity at the time, you understand. This extravagance is something you can only get a sense of by playing a game now. No, at the time everybody was much too annoyed by the absurdly long load times – and subsequently bewitched by *Half-Life* – to appreciate *SiN* for what it was. The last luddite shooter before the industrial age, happy just to give you a handgun bigger than your entire forearm, a screen full of identical goons, and a driveable JCB you operate for five seconds then park up forever.

Night Dive's typically sterling work means it's perfectly preserved for modern systems and, finally, easy to run on widescreen monitors. But Ritual's plaudits are long overdue for crafting a shooter whose charms and replayability far exceed our estimations in 1998. ■

Why I love

TEARING THINGS DOWN IN TEARDOWN

Smash and grab. ***By Nat Clayton***

RIGHT: That's one way to get to the snack aisle.

Remember the first time you brought a house down in *Red Faction: Guerrilla*? It felt like the start of something new. The beginning of an era of games that would be more tangible, more physical, and more breakable than ever before. Of course, that didn't happen. Games largely focussed on making static scenes look even shinier with sharper textures and ray-traced lighting. But thanks to a small Swedish developer, we have a window into that delightfully destructive alternate world – and believe me when I say *Teardown*'s window shatters very nicely indeed.

At its core, *Teardown* is a game of heists. Each new mission gives you a series of computers to steal, safes to nick, or cars to plunge into the ocean, challenging you to use a limited toolset to carve out a path towards the perfect crime. Don't get me wrong, it's a fun wee challenge – but it's not why I've opened up *Teardown* almost every day for the past year.

I'm playing *Teardown* every day because smashing things up never gets old. *Teardown* might be a voxel game, but Tuxedo Labs has taken great care to build its sandbox levels with true-to-life materials. Smashing a wall with a sledgehammer will crumble plaster while leaving tougher brickwork exposed.

It is the closest (and safest) means games have come to the experience of grabbing a hammer and going to town on a run-down construction site. But that faithfulness to life isn't just met by the materials. See, *Teardown* may be the best (and only) convincing argument I've seen for ray tracing. With every last voxel at risk of being tossed around the map, baked lighting wouldn't cut it – and while *Teardown*'s own ray tracing solution isn't as taxing or as accurate as RTX, it manages to perfectly paint your rubble with accurate lighting.

There's a phenomenal feeling that comes with seeing the light bounce through the hole you just shotgunned out of a shack roof. Tear the roof off a house in a storm and the furniture inside will become soaked, reflections dappled against their now-slick surfaces. *Teardown* may use voxels, but it uses them to create something utterly gorgeous.

TEARDOWN MAY USE VOXELS, BUT IT USES THEM TO CREATE SOMETHING GORGEOUS

KNOCK 'EM DOWN

That, alone, would be enough to keep me sticking around. Tuxedo Labs itself has done a good enough job adding new maps to tear apart, letting you cut about a riverside village and urban shopping mall with abandon. But over the past year, mod support has completely transformed *Teardown* from a fun curiosity into a worthy successor to the king of physics sandboxes, *Garry's Mod*.

Teardown's basic destruction can be enhanced. Feel like fires are going out too soon? Download a mod to keep the flames burning as long as possible. And while *Teardown* doesn't track structural integrity (buildings will remain 'floating' if even one voxel is connected to the ground), there are mods to fake this by having explosions cause chain reactions of shockwave damage. This is best seen on miniature city maps, where one tower collapse can bring an entire neighbourhood to rubble.

In recent months, we've also seen mods that add completely new and bizarre modes of play to *Teardown*. My favourite is *Basilisco*, a terrifying killer robot snake that floats through the skies with a piercing red spotlight. Evading this beast on a rain-soaked night map turns *Teardown* into something akin to a survival horror game. You'll hear a ghastly shriek and turn to find what was once an apartment block is now a pile of bricks.

Tuxedo Labs has even been teasing 'Part 2' of *Teardown* lately – adding more physics toys like ropes and thrusters, along with some truly horrific AI robots to stalk you through a map. I'm not just excited about how these will offer more opportunities to break apart the base game – I'm thrilled to see what the community will do to build on and expand these tools.

Dropping into the Steam Workshop to see what's new in *Teardown* has become a fun routine. It feels like popping down the shops, only instead of planning a new recipe for dinner I'm outlining what I want to smash up this week. Either way, something's getting ruined. ■

CARNAGE REPORT

Analysing a symphony of destruction

1 The shape of these holes and signs of blast marks suggest bombs were used to force entry into the building.

2 Once inside, it looks like the suspects used sledgehammers to break into the office.

3 At some point it appears a fire swept through the house, burning the lower levels.

4 ... hold on, did someone toss an entire boat at this building? I give up.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Oct 29, 2020

DEVELOPER
Tuxedo Labs

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
teardowngame.com

RIGHT: The eastbound train has been diverted, somewhat.

Must play

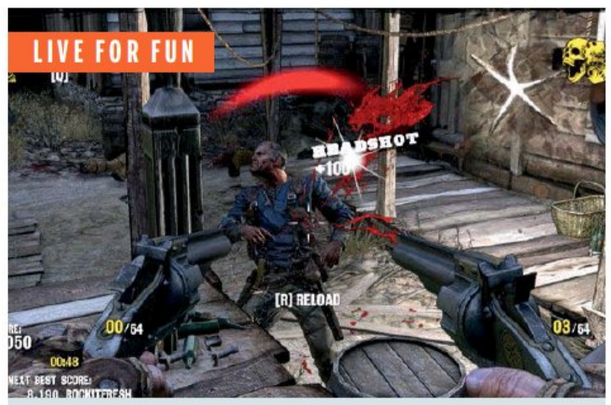
TYLER WILDE

I recently bought a TV so that I can stop watching movies at my desk with the ShadowPlay overlay visible. It was expensive, so here are some not so expensive games.

QUAKE (ENHANCED)

bethesda.net/game/quake

A remaster of the inspiration for all the filthy-looking, hard-angle-having shooters people over 35 keep making for each other. Make sure to rebind the mouse and keyboard controls to some ridiculous pre-WASD configuration for the old school experience.



CALL OF JUAREZ: GUNSLINGER

bit.ly/3bbmhWE

No mucking about around here: Just lots of dudes popping up from behind Old West things – bars, wagons, you know – and getting shot by you. $21 and 4.65GB gets you five or so hours of what we correctly considered high quality fun in 2013. Regularly on sale for even less.

COOKIE CLICKER

orteil.dashnet.org/cookieclicker

The infamous web game about clicking on a cookie to make more cookies is now on Steam for$7.50. If you're unsure why you'd want to click on a cookie to make more cookies, then try the free web version first. You may spend several hours not finding the answer.

PLEASE, DON'T TOUCH ANYTHING

bit.ly/3jF0j1a

Before the great *Loop Hero*, developer Four Quarters made this $7.50 game in which you aren't meant to touch anything. But if you do press the big red button on the control panel you're meant to leave alone, something might happen. And isn't that all we want in life?

MUST PLAY

A PERSONAL LIST OF THE BEST GAMES YOU CAN PLAY RIGHT NOW

by Tyler Wilde

BACK 4 BLOOD

back4blood.com

The unofficial *Left 4 Dead 3* is $89.95, which does feel a bit outdated for a four-player co-op game, even though it's worth it. But *B4B* is also on Xbox Game Pass for PC, so you and your friends can go get chomped by a horde of zombos for far less instead, if you want.

LORDS OF THE FALLEN

bit.ly/2Zjg8oF

Instead of staring at the *Elden Ring* subreddit waiting for new details, play a game that probably isn't as good as *Elden Ring* will be, but will sate your thirst for dodging giant swords anyway. *LotF* has gotten a few patches since my 58% review, and regularly goes on sale.

FUSER

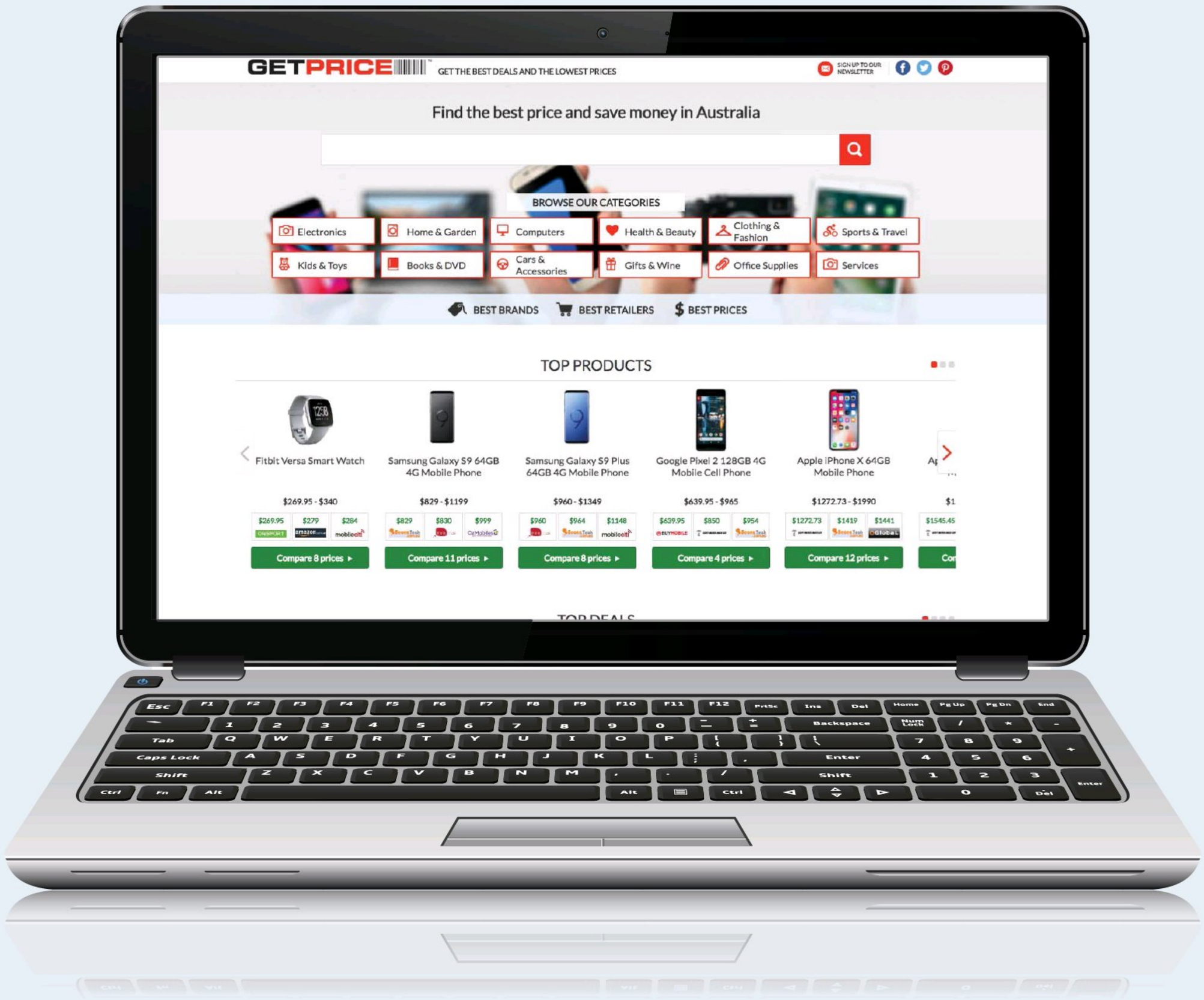
fuser.com

$89 felt too pricey for this nifty Harmonix DJing sim, regardless of how much I enjoyed defacing recent hits by ruthlessly dropping the vocal track from Smash Mouth's 'All Star' into the middle of them. A year later, *Fuser* is down to a much more agreeable $31.45. Go ruin some

PUNCH CLUB

lazybeargames.com/game/punch-club

I've recently gotten to know some amateur boxers, and it turns out that *Punch Club* presents a pretty accurate picture of a boxer's life: work, train, eat, sleep, fight. Granted, none of the boxers I've met have fought any crocodiles yet, but I'm sure that'll happen any day now.



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WINNERS!

GAME OF THE YEAR

WHO AND WHAT WINS THE GOTY CROWN?